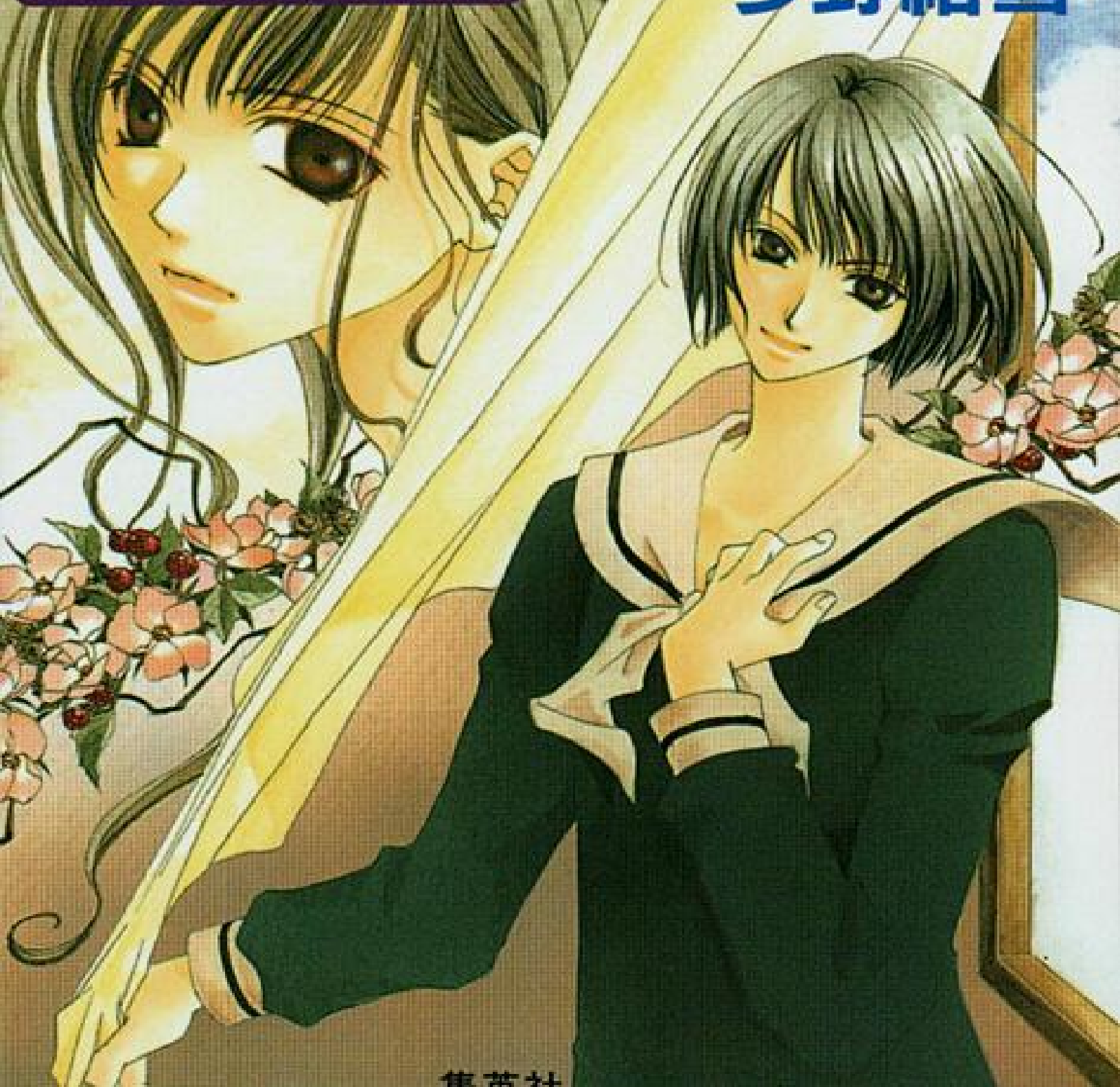


マリア様がみてる

ロサ・カニーナ

今野緒雪



Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 4

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Prologue

ロサ・フェティタ・アン・フットン フェティ・スール
黄薔薇のつぼみの妹
(島津由乃)



ロサ・フェティタ・アン・フットン
黄薔薇のつぼみ
(支倉 令)

ロサ・キガンティア・アン・フットン
白薔薇のつぼみ
(藤堂志摩子)



ロサ・キネンシス
紅薔薇さま

ロサ・キガンティア
白薔薇さま



ロサ・キネシス・アン・フットン
紅薔薇のつぼみ
(小笠原祥子)

ロサ・キネシス・アン・フットン アデル・スール
紅薔薇のつぼみの妹
(福沢祐巳)



ロサ・フェティタ
黄薔薇さま

リリアン女学園写真部特別展示
「山百合会の幹部たち」

Photo by 武嶋薦子

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-coloured school uniform.

Walking slowly as to not disturb the plaits in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves here.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

The new semester after the turn of the year.

The world’s exam students placed a period at the end of their New Year’s celebrations with a Nanakusagayu, and were preparing for the final stretch by tightening their headbands and grinding their studies out, but on the other end of the spectrum were the laid-back, relaxed maidens at Lillian Girls’ Academy. There was no stressful mood in sight.

Aside from “gokigenyou” instead being “Happy New Years” during the commencement ceremonies for the new semester, life was as usual.

All because of Maria-sama's caring watch.

Thank you, heavenly mother, and please continue to watch over us- the sight of girls standing at the fork, in front of the Maria-sama statue, praying with their gloveless hands together looked as pure as ever.

And among them.

Perhaps a particularly special prayer? One student had been standing there, praying for a long time. Standing slightly to the right side of the fence that surrounded Maria-sama, she stood there, a cool-looking girl with soft, neck-length black hair.

Already the fifth student that had arrived after her had stood by her side, prayed, and left, but hers didn't end. No one paid enough attention to see who was praying by their side, but even so, three minutes had elapsed.

Finally, when she opened her eyes, she looked up at Maria-sama with eyes filled with determination.

Rosa Canina

A lonesome warmth

Part 1.

The first day of the third semester.

Like other schools, Lillian Girls' Academy lifted the curtains to the new semester with an opening ceremony.

“Ugh, it’s cold.”

First-year peach-class attendance number 35, Fukuzawa Yumi shivered, like the swaying of a horse, the moment she stepped out to the hallway.

She wasn't fond of winter, having been born in the spring. Plus, the building she was in was structurally old, so it was absolutely miserable. Wind actually snuck into the hallways. She wanted to turn around immediately and huddle next to a stove, but part of the reason why school life was so harsh was because she couldn't. She needed to attend the opening ceremony at the sanctuary, as it was an obligation, and in a way, a privilege of being a student.

The bell that sounded just a moment earlier sounded especially crisp as it traveled through the cold air. Maybe it was because she hadn't heard it in a while.

Normally, as soon as the late bell sounded, the morning prayer would be broadcast. But that wasn't the case on ceremonial days like this. We'll just handle the morning prayers right before the opening ceremony! was the school's very logical reasoning.

Even the homeroom teacher simply popped in for a quick new year's greeting, and then rushed back to the staff room after giving an abridged

homeroom session.

“Quickly form a line in the hallway and follow the other class to the sanctuary.”

The students obediently answered, “Okay,” to the teacher’s directions.

Counting from the day they entered high school, it would be their fifth ceremony, combining the opening and closing ceremonies. At which point you ended up becoming used to it, so even if the teacher wasn’t keeping an eye on you all the time, you handled it smoothly. Actually, maybe we ended up doing everything smoothly because the teacher wasn’t here.

“The sanctuary is warm, probably.”

Katsura-san smiled bitterly, she was born in the winter. She seemed to find the sight of classmates feverishly rubbing their hands against disposable hand warmers, like flies, absurd.

“Thanks for the pose!”

And that voice came accompanied with a flash.

Surprised, Yumi looked and saw Takeshima Tsutako, this time laughing and showing off a different camera than the one she had at the second-semester closing ceremony. Well, the other one was probably a Christmas present, and this one was probably bought using the New Year’s gifts. How many did she need?

“Tsutako-san, they might not look kindly upon a camera at the ceremony.”

Several classmates surrounded her, glared at her, and scolded her.

Actually, there’s a reason for this. During the second-semester closing ceremony, she used her camera’s flash, and apparently the teachers all ended up staring at her class. Fortunately, she put away her camera and sat quietly for the rest of the ceremony, but the girls around her were embarrassed to death.

“... Okay, I’ll keep my camera in my case. So don’t confiscate it!”

“Fine. As long as you promise.”

The teachers had already left with the bag of valuable items, and if something were to happen to the camera by leaving it in the classroom, that would be a whole new set of problems, so the girls let her go. Cameras are expensive, after all. But when she put her camera in her pocket, the bulge in her plaited-skirt was quite visible and ugly.

“Have you lined up in attendance order? The chrysanthemum class has already gone in, so follow after them.”

At the class president’s directive, the peach class also split up into two lines and began walking down the cold, cold hallway. As they passed through the courtyard, she noticed ice needles in the shadows, holding up mounds of dirt, like a bunch of mushrooms had sprouted.

A cold day at school had begun.

We entered the sanctuary starting with the lowest grades. First, the plum class, then the wisteria class, then the chrysanthemum class. Followed by the peach, pine, and camellia classes. Once the first-years finished being seated, the second-years followed, and then the third-years. The first-year welcoming ceremony and graduation ceremonies were always lead by the spotlight grade, like third-years for graduation, but otherwise the young students always welcomed the elder statesmen into the room. That was how it’d always been.

After the second-years entered the sanctuary, while somewhat improper, Yumi spun around and searched for her onee-sama. Of course, if she were seen like this, she knew she’d be scolded, “Don’t look around restlessly!” But that was the nature of little sisters, so she hoped she would be forgiven. It was like a child during parent visitation day at school. Other first-years were also doing the same.

(Well, other than Shimako-san.)

Shimako-san, sitting diagonally in front of her, didn't betray her expectations, sitting straight and looking ahead. Well, that *sœur* was special, so that's just how it was, with them.

(But Yoshino-san, with how glued to Rei-sama she is...)

But when Yumi glanced at the chrysanthemum class in front of her, she noticed Yoshino-san was just whispering with her classmate. Even though it was Rei-sama's entrance scene, she didn't even show signs of wanting to look.

“...”

Come to think of it.

Shimako-san was in more of a “not my responsibility” sisterly relationship, and Yoshino-san was always with Rei-sama anyways, so neither of them really needed to confirm anything. –Which meant, embarrassingly enough, Yumi was the only first-year in the Rose family that was restlessly looking about.

(Am I standing out...?)

She blushed. Just then, with good timing, the second-year pine-class students entered.

Onee-sama's name was Ogasawara Sachiko. Because the attendance numbers were ordered by name, being number seven, she was always near the front.

Her heart beat.

Even though she'd be scolded that it was unladylike, her eyes kept wandering in that direction.

One, two, three, four... Maybe some students were absent. Sachiko-sama showed up on number five. As she appeared, she must have noticed Yumi,

as she made a scolding “hey!” face before taking a seat.

(W, w, wow...!)

Even though she’d just been scolded, she had to stop herself from smiling outright. If she could, she’d go by onee-sama’s side and be scolded directly.

(Am I masochistic?)

Compared to when onee-sama was just an adored upperclassman, Yumi’s “Sachiko-sama sickness” was definitely advancing.

“It’s certainly not a good condition. I’ll prescribe you some medicine, so make sure you take it every day.”

She imagined Rosa Gigantea, dressed up as a doctor, show up and give her an evil grin. When Yumi snapped out of her illusion, the third-years were already coming in.

“Yumi-san, it’s about to start, so you should wake up.”

Katsura-san, sitting next to her, whispered the warning. –It seemed she’d been daydreaming for about five minutes.

Yumi stifled a yawn. It seemed she was a bit sleep deprived. Of course, the reason was onee-sama. When she thought about seeing onee-sama for the first time in a few days, she became too excited to sleep. She definitely had a serious case of “Sachiko-sama sickness.”

(No, no.)

When she started spacing out, the illusion of Rosa Gigantea returned, trying to drag her into the kingdom of sleep. The sanctuary was warm, so her eyelids automatically began drooping.

She straightened her back and look straight ahead. When she locked eyes with Maria-sama, standing on the platform, she felt like her sleepiness had been whisked away.

It wasn't the white Maria-sama statue that stood at the fork among the ginkgo trees, but rather the full-color Maria-sama that was in the hallway of the visitor entrance, right before the offices. She embraced Jesus in her left arm and wore a fabulous crown on her head. Apparently she'd been brought to the sanctuary today, specially for the ceremony.

(Huh?)

A classmate who'd vanished after attendance was taken was on the platform, singing a hymn, wearing a white, apron-like clothing on top of her uniform.

(Oh, yeah.)

The third-years retired from the choir, she remembered. Until then, the first-years only did backstage work, even if they were part of the choir. Of course, you learnt the hymns while doing the backstage work. But today was the first-years' choir debut.

After the students all entered the sanctuary, Yumi looked around again. The third-year neighborhood looked especially lonesome. Even for the relaxed Lillian Girls' Academy, the third-years at this time of year must be busy.

Compared to the first-years and second-years, it felt like many third-years were absent.

Part 2.

“That's not too surprising.”

Answered onee-sama, in the Rose Mansion.

“Those taking exams are likely busy with that, and the third-year supervisor said they didn't need to force themselves to come.”

“Is that so?”

Yoshino-san brought a warm cup of black tea to Sachiko-sama, who'd come in after them. Yumi, who'd been beaten to the punch because she stood up a second later, put her cooling teacup to her mouth and shifted slightly away from Sachiko-sama. It was a bit nerve-wracking. She was lonely when they didn't see each other, but once they sat next to each other, she had no idea what she was supposed to do. “Onee-sama” is a mysterious being.

“Lillian doesn't prepare you all that well for exams, so you are left to your individual autonomy, I suppose.”

As she spoke, Sachiko-sama placed both of her hands around the teacup, warming them.

It was after school, as their only task after the ceremony was to retrieve their report cards from homeroom.

The Yamayurikai headquarters, also known as the “Rose Mansion,” currently housed Rosa Chinensis en bouton and her sister, as well as the sister of Rosa Foetida en bouton.

The three Roses handed Sachiko-sama their contact info and quickly departed from school. Rei-sama and Shimako-san were probably busy with helping out their club and classes, but they would probably come soon.

“It's a bit lonesome.”

Sachiko-sama mumbled, casting her eyes down.

(... Oh, yeah.)

When the year ends, there was no escaping from the word “graduation.” To Sachiko-sama, Rosa Chinensis was her one and only onee-sama, and thus was to Sachiko-sama as she was to Yumi. When you thought about your dependable onee-sama going far away, it was obviously lonesome. Plus, Rosa Chinensis declared long ago that she would be taking exams for a different university. No doubt Sachiko-sama felt that, even if onee-sama

were to graduate, if she attended the university in the same premise, it would be reassuring, but that wasn't to be the case.

“Onee-sama-”

Yumi began, but she felt afraid of asking her onee-sama. What did Sachiko-sama plan to do next year? She couldn't imagine school without Sachiko-sama. Though, no matter what Sachiko-sama planned, graduation was inevitable, so Yumi's high school life was destined to be shut in darkness.

“What?”

“No, nevermind.”

Yumi reflected on her own character after she carelessly thought, if only Sachiko-sama repeated a year, then they would be together. She felt so self-centered she couldn't look Maria-sama in the eye.

She was envious of Yoshino-san. Rei-sama long ago declared her intention of attending Lillian's university, so she had no need to fret like this, and they lived in what amounted to the same house, anyways, so even if Rei-sama graduated, they could see each other any time.

The creaking sound of the stairs reached Yumi. She didn't have as superhuman a hearing as Rosa Gigantea, but even Yumi could tell it belonged to one person.

The footsteps were fairly quick, so Yumi was surprised to see it was Shimako-san rather than Rei-sama. She was normally so calm, so this was surprising.

“Has anyone heard of the word Rosa Canina?”

And again surprising was that Shimako-san, upon entering the room, skipped greetings and jumped straight into a topic.

“Rosa Canina?”

The three of them asked, at once, and then shook their heads.

“What is that?”

Sachiko-sama looked back, doubtfully, but Shimako-san also shook her head.

“I’m not sure.”

Well, she probably asked, “Does anyone know?” because she didn’t know.

But, “Rosa Canina.” Was it related to the Roses? -Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea, Rosa Foetida. And, Rosa Canina.

They all seemed to ponder the same thing, as they folded their arms and thought. This time, the stairs creaked really loudly, like there was an earth tremor going on. No doubt Rei-sama.

“Hey, who’s Rosa Canina?”

Without bothering to fully open the biscuit-shaped door, Rei-sama shouted to the people within. Curiously, she asked the same thing as Shimako-san, although worded quite differently.

“So, Rosa Canina is a person, may I presume?”

Sachiko-sama confirmed. Rei-sama, who’d just arrived at the Rose Mansion, simply responded nodded with an “of course” expression on her face. She didn’t know about how they’d heard the name.

“Of course it’s a person. She’s a student at our school.”

“I see. You’ve gathered three more minutes’ worth of information than Shimako, in exchange for coming later.”

As expected of Sachiko-sama. Her ears were as sharp as ever. Come to think of, Shimako-san was asking only about the term Rosa Canina.

“Rei... I mean, onee-sama. Onee-sama, where did you hear about this?”

She'd been completely soaked into cousin mode over winter break, as Yoshino-san struggled to resume calling Rei-sama onee-sama.

"In the hallway in front of my classroom. A bunch of students were chatting. I wouldn't have cared, but then when they noticed me, they stopped talking. Well that made me curious, so I kept in mind what I heard before they stopped."

"And that's Rosa Canina?"

"Yup."

As Rosa Gigantea nodded, Shimako-san said, "Me, too."

"The same thing happened to me. I think they were second-years, but they were talking at the stairs, and when they saw me, they looked extremely conflicted before they went away."

"Something they didn't want Shimako-san to hear, maybe?"

ESPer, or the reputable detective Yoshino-san groaned. No, maybe in her case, it's more like a plain-clothes detective from a historical play.

That would make Sachiko-sama the police officer. And all of them standing in a circle was like idle gossiping at a tenement.

"I intuitively felt they were talking about me, or the Yamayurikai staff."

Shimako-san quietly looked at the ceiling, remembering. Yumi also looked up. Oh, a spider web.

"Wait. Shimako aside, how did Rei know Rosa Canina is a student?"

Good question, Sachiko-sama. But Yumi felt a bit sad, being left out a bit. She wasn't able to find that "good question" with her own strength. Of course, so that onee-sama wouldn't read her thoughts, she did everything possible to keep her facial muscles still.

"Uhh, I wonder why?"

Rei-sama folded her arms and looked down. And of course, Yumi, too, looked down. This time she saw cotton lint at the edge of the floor. When you don't use a room for two weeks, even with no one living in it, it became dirty.

“Oh, right. They were talking about her doing something. That Rosa Canina.”

After some thought, Rei-sama finally managed to succeed dragging out bits and pieces of her memory.

“Doing what?”

Yoshino-san urged her.

“Umm. I think they mentioned announcing her candidacy?”

“Candidacy?”

The four other than Rei-sama simultaneously asked back. But Yumi was the only one with a different tone to the question. Yumi was more like, “What do you mean by announcing her candidacy?” while the Sachiko-sama, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san had all cleared that hurdle and were more like, “She's actually announcing her candidacy?”

“How amusing, we'll accept the challenge.”

Sachiko-sama laughed fearlessly.

“How depressing.”

Rei-sama scratched her short hair.

“... Oh.”

Shimako-san simply smiled.

As for Yoshino-san.

“What should we do, Yumi-san?”

For some reason, she asked Yumi. (...)

What should we do? Yumi thought it awkward asking for a person's idea when that person had no idea what was going on.

But, oh.

If she were to ask, “What's going on?” It would, without a doubt, be like throwing a weighted stone into the flow of the conversation.

To start with, that would embarrass her onee-sama. Oh how much she wished she could throw herself into the river instead of the weighted stone. It was such a pinch of a situation that she wanted to just be swept somewhere else.

“At the end of January, there's an election to see who's going to be in the next student council. If she's announcing her candidacy, that would mean she'll first run in that election.”

Sachiko-sama, next to her, mumbled. It was slightly louder than whispering, so that Yumi could hear.

“O, onee-sama...”

It would be wonderful if it was something as beautiful as telepathy, but it was, of course, Sachiko-sama saving her sister from embarrassment. Her onee-sama, being intelligent to make up for her sister's deficiencies: how cynical. –Wait, it wasn't the time to be sentimental!

“Th, th, then. Depending on that election, onee-sama might not be the next Rosa Chinensis!?”

Snapping back to reality, after she chewed on what she was told, she realized how critical this topic was.

“Hey, Yumi, you shouldn't shake peoples' shoulders, it hurts.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

What a blunder. She’d become so agitated she latched onto onee-sama. When she let go, Sachiko-sama looked exasperated and fixed her pulled sleeves.

Yumi finally understood.

Bouton weren’t guaranteed to become Roses. Well, considering Lillian Girls’ Academy stood in Japan, which was a democracy, it would be odd if the student council was decided without listening to the peoples’ opinion.

But, because they were “bouton,” she wanted them to blossom into full-grown flowers. Though that was her personal opinion.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean Sachiko. It could mean me or Shimako.”

Rei-sama laughed and pointed out.

“Even if the possibility is equal, the probability is not.”

“Shimako.”

Sachiko-sama said the name in a scolding manner, but Shimako-san continued to express her opinion, undeterred.

“If that Rosa Canina is a second-year student, it might actually be natural.”

(Ah...)

What Shimako-san was trying to say. Even Yumi could see it.

Currently, there was no second-year student in the white rose family. That was simply because Rosa Gigantea chose a sister two years her junior. That was why Shimako-san, despite being a first-year, was forced to carry the heavy burden of being Rosa Gigantea en bouton.

At this rate, she would be Rosa Gigantea next year, despite being a second-year. But if there was another person, a second-year, who was just as

capable as Rei-sama and Sachiko-sama, maybe it would be more fitting than herself? Might be what Shimako-san wanted to say.

So if one of the boutons were to not become a Rose, it would be herself, because she was a year under the norm.

Would that be called withdrawing? No, it was different, there was a more appropriate word for it-.

“You’re running away?”

With perfect timing, Sachiko-sama said. It was the right nuance, but Yumi thought it was a harsh way of putting it. If it were Yumi, she would apologize, “I’m sorry,” and tearfully beg for forgiveness, even if she’d done nothing wrong.

“No.”

But Shimako-san. Even if she was in a different grade, she was a bouton, too. She looked Sachiko-sama straight in the eye and answered.

“It would be an inexcusable transgression against onee-sama, who chose me as her sister. I will run, in the election. And I have no intention of losing.”

“What a passively strong stance.”

But Shimako-sama simply smiled, not answering Sachiko-sama’s pointed remark.

Shimako-san was unfathomable. –Yumi thought, yet again.

Part 3.

Anyways, it got them nowhere thinking about it then. So, they broke up, with the intention of coming up with a counter-measure tomorrow after school, after everyone'd individually sought out information.

When they stepped out of the Rose Mansion, they noticed the school was empty, even though it was just past noon. There was no regular club activities after the opening ceremonies, so it was after most students had already left. The group of them thus silently walked down the quiet hallway toward the school gate. It wasn't that they were showing diffidence to those around them, but rather, they were all mired deep in their own thoughts.

Passing the library and showing up in front of the Maria-sama statue, the five of them lined up and put their hands together.

What were they each praying?

Were they saying their usual prayers? Or were they praying about the Yamayurikai election?

Either way, they were all isolated while they stood facing Maria-sama. When they close their eyes and put their hands together, people confront their own holy person. Even the closest of people to them are removed. Basically, it was truly impossible to enter someone else's soul.

The ginkgo pathway felt much colder than the morning.

After going separate ways with Yoshino-san and Rei-sama, even while she stood at the bus stop with Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san, and even while she rode the bus with them, Yumi couldn't stop feeling lonely.

"Are you cold?"

Sachiko-sama softly inquired.

"No."

They were far from the students' departure peak, so the bus was extremely empty, and as people stepped on and off the bus, the cold wind quickly flowed through the door and throughout the bus.

“Come closer, it’ll help.”

Sachiko-sama was sitting at the back of the bus, on the long, connected seat, and she pulled Yumi, sitting by her side, closer. Their arms and waists became glued to each other, and they felt each other’s warmth through the coats and uniforms.

It was warm. But Yumi felt even more lonely.

Why did she feel like crying the more she felt onee-sama’s warmth?

“What should we do, Yumi-san?”

Yoshino-san’s words suddenly came back to life inside Yumi.

(... Oh, so that’s what.)

Yoshino-san probably understood, having been a little sister for so long. That one day, they, too, would be fretting over this.

It was their onee-sama’s crisis, so they needed to be a crutch.

(But I’m always being cared for by onee-sama, and I’ve never been able to repay her.)

What should we do.

(You’re right, Yoshino-san.)

For their beloved onee-sama, what could they do? The time to seriously think about that had come.

The bus took a sharp, right turn.

Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san both looked out their respective windows. But neither of them were looking at the winter city.

Even though she sat next to them, they felt very far away.

Rosa Canina?

Part 1.

The next morning, Yumi went to school earlier than usual and went to the library.

The Lillian Girls' Academy middle school and high school library reading rooms opened at seven thirty. The students that were in charge of looking after the library didn't arrive until later, so as to not burden the supervising teacher too much, borrowing and returning books wasn't allowed until eight, but it was a good system for students that wanted to do pre-class research or finish studying. –Of course, Yumi'd never taken advantage of this before.

“Umm, a book of roses, a book of roses...”

There was no Rosa Canina in her plant encyclopedia at home. Not just Rosa Canina, but there was no Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida or Rosa Gigantea, either, so it was quite useless. Even though nine species for breeding and seven species for gardening, for a total of sixteen, species of roses were in it. Finally realizing that there were many types of roses, she decided to look it up in the library. She'd already concluded that because it was called Rosa Canina, that it must be a rose.

Seven fifty. When she went straight to the library and then into the reading room, one of the three catalogue computers was luckily open.

The search requested you to choose between author, title or keyword, and then prompted you to enter the name or words. Yumi, of course, chose keyword and entered “rose.”

Please wait.
Searching...

(How long will it take?)

-But it immediately finished.

“Eek.”

Showing restraint in the quiet library, Yumi covered her mouth.

(Eek...)

She casually entered “rose,” and found her screen flooded with entries. There were so many hits the list kept going.

(What, what should I do?)

It was like yanking on the roll of toilet paper, and then finding the roll kept spinning and spinning.

Spin spin spin spin.

When will it end? Probably until you could see the earth-colored wick in the middle. Then what do you do with the enormous amount of toilet paper in your hands?

(Ummm.)

How worrisome. Well, it wasn’t actually toilet paper so she didn’t have to worry about being overwhelmed by the white sheets all over the floor.

4712 entries.

After the message showed up on the computer, she hit back.

(Phew.)

Saved. The computer's toilet paper had an automatic re-wind.

(However.)

If she went through each of the 4712 entries, the day would be long over. And she'd only been up for a couple hours since waking up, too.

The list was ordered by name, rather than relevance or price of the book. So the first one on the list was a novel titled, "Ahh, my beloved, you remind me of a rose."

(Time to go further down the list.)

Bringing her mouse cursor to the scrollbar, she dragged the list down to where titles began with "rose." She wondered if there were books in the library that actually were about roses, but she found out that the system catalogued books from the university library and the elementary and kindergarten libraries, too, so if needed, they could move the books around. A useful system.

But even such a useful system was useless if the user computer illiterate, like pearls before swine, or praying into a horse's ear... wait, that might be wrong. Anyways, her search was apparently bad, because "rose" ended up with all sorts of things, like "rose-like blood-splatter," so it was dreadful indeed. She wished it would at least divide things into categories.

"Umm, excuse me-"

As Yumi frantically tried to search, someone suddenly touched her shoulders from behind.

"Ah, yes?"

At first, she thought she was being cautioned for using the computer so long.

“I’m sorry, I’ll be done in a moment.”





But that was wrong. Because no one was at the other two computers anymore.

“Indeed. I think you should be done now, though, Fukuzawa Yumi-san.”

That person smiled. Yumi didn’t recognize her. From her ambiance, she felt like an upperclassman. Her first impression was, “She looks cool.” Maybe it was because of her short, straight hair, or maybe it was her looks. She looked cool, but on top of that, she was also pretty.

“Uh, umm-”

The other computers were open, so why did she need to leave? Yumi became confused. Then, she reached past Yumi and told the computer to conclude the search.

“You should finish research during lunch break or afterschool, I think. At least, if you don’t want to be late.”

“Eh!?”

She looked at her watch. Eight twenty-one. Wow. The early bell had already rung, and the morning prayer would be broadcast soon.

“Thank you very much. I completely forgot.”

“You’re welcome. I’m part of the library committee, so it’s part of my job. ... Now, let’s hurry.”

She had also seemingly come straight to the library after coming to school, as she picked up her bag and coat and left the library with Yumi.

“Yumi-san, were you looking up roses?”

“Yes.”

Yumi nodded, walking quickly.

She wondered how she knew, for a moment, but remembered she had finished the search for her. Of course she'd caught a glimpse of the screen.

"My encyclopedia at home doesn't have them listed. Even Rosa Chinensis."

"There're a lot of modified species of roses. Though, shouldn't it have Rosa Chinensis? It's a major species, as many roses nowadays used it as a root."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

She probably didn't mean it that way, but Yumi felt a bit down when she giggled. The sister of Rosa Chinensis en bouton was learning about the rose Rosa Chinensis from someone else. She walked through the entrance, disparaging herself. However, the library committee student was well-versed about roses-.

"Umm, do you know of the rose Rosa Canina?"

Maybe, she thought, and she asked after placing her shoes in the shoe boxes.

"Rosa Canina?"

After repeating the question, she immediately replied.

"Yes, I do."

It was an unexpectedly quick turn-about. After searching so hard, she couldn't find the answer, but now she found it in a simple place.

"It's a rose, after all?"

"Yes."

"What sort of flower is it?"

When she shot questions in quick sequence, she was countered, “What sort do you think it is?”

“What sort...”

In truth, she’d never even stopped to imagine it. But she was an underclassman who was being taught. Plus, she didn’t have much time left. The number of students in the hallway had dwindled, and even those students were jogging.

“If I were to come up with an image off the top of my head... a black rose.”

There was already a red, white, and yellow rose. And if, as Rei-sama said, Rosa Canina was a Lillian student and challenging the traditional red, white and yellow boutons, then she must have a strong personality. So, black. Plus, from a personal viewpoint, she was more of a villain, so it was definitely black.

“Correct.”

She narrowed her eyes and answered.

“Rosa Canina is a black rose.”

Just then, the late bell began ringing.

“Ah, that’s not good. Thank you very much, gokigenyou.”

Yumi bowed slightly and began running. The cool girl calmly walked to the second-year classrooms.

“Let’s meet again, Fukuzawa Yumi-san.”

After she whispered thus.

Part 2.

“Did something happen with Sachiko-sama?”

She stood, holding the broom and staring into space, when Tsutako-san leaned in and peered into her face.

“Why?”

Yumi remembered to sweep the floor. Then, Tsutako-san went and brought a dustpan and placed it just beyond the pile of dust. They weren't in the same cleaning group, but she stood there anyways, like it was natural. Her cleaning group already finished, apparently.

It was cleaning time, after school.

“Yumi-san, you're in an unusually gloomy state. When that happens, the reason must be Sachiko-sama. Plus, you were almost late to the morning prayers today, too.”

“Tsutako-san, I appreciate you helping with cleaning, but...”

“I know, I know, it's because of Rosa Canina, right?”

“How did you-”

“I read your mind. Who do you think I am?”

The photography club ace, Takeshima Tsutako-san.

“I heard the details from the newspaper club captain.”

“... You were just eavesdropping.”

Yumi interjected as she swept the dust onto the dustpan. The students in her cleaning group had begun running a moistened mop across the wooden floors, where she'd finishing sweeping.

“Oh don't be like that. Anyways, it sounds like Sachiko-sama's in a pinch.”

“True.”

She took the dustpan from Tsutako-san and bee-lined for the garbage bin. But the photography club’s ace hounded her. Usually, she would just be getting in the way of cleaning, like this, but she was helping, so Yumi couldn’t complain.

In the end, Yumi would have her uneasiness pried out of the shadows by Tsutako-san.

“So basically, Yumi-san is pondering over her *raison d’etre*.”

“*Raison d’etre*?” That’s right, she would spontaneously pull out difficult words or phrases and make the conversation difficult. That’s what Takeshima Tsutako-san did.

“*Raison d’etre*, or in other words, your personal charm point that no one else can hope to match. You are ‘Fukuzawa Yumi’ because of this, for instance. Of course, most people never figure out what makes them attractive.”

“Attractive? My charming, baby raccoon face? Or being a natural airhead?”

When Yumi put away the broom and dustpan into the cleaning locker, looking exasperated, Tsutako-san looked extremely serious and said, “Not that kind of superficial thing.”

“For example, Yumi-san is here. And with that, some people’s lives have changed.”

“Even if I don’t do anything?”

“Of course.”

Even if the pitcher throws the same ball, if the angle of the bat changes just a bit, it could end in either a home run or a foul, she said. Yumi didn’t watch baseball much, but she still got the idea.

Even if it began from the same spot and went the same distance, with just a small turn the landing spot would change completely. Is what she was trying to say. Even the smallest of incidents could affect a person and change their life.

“Isn’t that dreadful?”

“It is dreadful, life. But, that’s what makes it fun. Perhaps Sachiko-sama thought, in a good way, that her life would change by choosing Yumi-san to be her sister?”

“Hmm.”

“It’s a good thing, is what I mean. Sachiko-sama didn’t want a sister like her. You hear it a lot, that people seek people who have what they don’t, you know?”

It sounded like she was generalizing quite a bit. She was no match for Tsutako-san when it came to a verbal discussion.

When they finished cleaning the rear-half, and then the front-half, they brought the desks back to their original positions. When Yumi dragged a desk to the right place, Tsutako-san took the chair that was placed upside-down on the desk, lowered it to the floor, and turned it around. The students that finished wiping the blackboard would then rinse their dust cloths and wipe the desks. And, when you finished all of that, cleaning would be finished. The painstaking waxing was done once every two weeks, so they didn’t do that today.

“I... What should I do?”

“You have to think of that yourself.”

Even though Yumi cordially listened to her, Tsutako-san simply left her alone when it came to a crucial topic.

“You’re cold.”

“Yup. Human relationships are different, person to person, you know? Sachiko-sama’s sister is Yumi-san. I’m just Yumi-san’s friend. So all I can do is divert the newspaper club’s information to illegal channels.”

Then, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her student notebook.

“Kanina Shizuka (蟹名静). Second-year wisteria class, attendance number ten. She’s part of the chorus.”

“What?”

“Rosa Canina’s identity. You hadn’t found that out yet, right?”

She’d taken a photo, too, but she hadn’t developed it yet, so she’d bring it tomorrow. Said Tsutako-san, extremely proud of herself.

“Thank you, Tsutako-san!”

It’s good to have friends. Plus, for all her cockiness, she did her share of work.

“How do you write Kanina?”

“Kani, from hair crab, and na, from name.”

“What an unusual name.”

“Well there’s an Ebina (海老名 – Ebi = shrimp), so Kanina isn’t that far off.”

“Mmm.”

Yumi took out her own student notebook and jotted it down. She would ask Yoshino-san later if she knew anything about “Kanina Shizuka-sama.”

“Mmm, that’s all?”

Tsutako-san looked let-down.

“Is that bad?”

“Come on, Yumi-san. Kanina becomes Rosa Canina. What are your thoughts, on such an embarrassingly straight nickname?”

“Oh, right, I didn’t notice.”

She found out this morning that Rosa Canina was a real rose, and that it was a black rose, so she ended up being satisfied. So her real name was more like simple memorization. All she really cared about was that it was a name she hadn’t heard before. After all, no matter what that person’s name was, she was still Sachiko-sama’s opponent.

“Get a grip. How’re you going to weather the storm like that?”

That hurt. That really hurt. Because she didn’t need to be told it.

“However. Onee-sama’s Yamayurikai staff election episode is quite a burden, but then you think about going through that, and living through your onee-sama’s exam as well as her graduation, like Shimako-san, and now you’ve got problems, don’t you think?”

“Oh, Rosa Gigantea is taking exams?”

How unbelievable, Yumi thought. Because she never looked like she was, and to start with, were people taking exams allowed to wander around in that manner?

“Maybe, apparently. At the very least, no one’s heard her talk about a priority entry into Lillian’s university or junior college. Right, Shimako-san?”

Seeing Shimako-san step into the room by chance, Tsutako-san forcibly dragged her over.

“Eh? What? Onee-sama’s course?”

Shimako-san tilted her head.

For a moment, Yumi thought, “No way,” but then she rejected the notion. After all, even with how “their” relationship was, even Shimako-san had to have heard about what Rosa Gigantea planned to do after graduating. After all, it was already in the countdown stages, being after New Year’s.

But.

As Yumi and Tsutako-san held their breaths and watched, Shimako-san looked extremely serious and said.

“I wonder...?”

As expected of the my-pace Shimako-san. “Come to think of it, what does she plan to do?” said Shimako-san, as if she’d just now thought of it.

“... Hello, Shimako-san. Why don’t you ask something that important directly?”

It was dead winter, but Tsutako-san still had a sweat drop.

“Indeed. But, it wasn’t that I couldn’t ask, but rather that I forgot to ask. But I understand, I’ll try to remember asking the next time I see her.”

Smiling like an angel, Shimako-san went to her seat and took out note-taking equipment from her bag. The water vapor on the glass windows reflected the sunlight and illuminated Shimako-san.

Shimako-san looked so white that it wouldn’t have been a surprise if angelic wings sprouted behind her. Not so much the color of her skin, but her existence, as a whole. If Yumi could see people’s auras, Shimako-san would no doubt be white. As expected of the white rose family.

When Yumi pointed that out, Tsutako-san snickered.

“Then Yumi-san is always blushing, so you’re part of the crimson rose family.”

One zabuton[\[1\]](#) for Tsutako-san!

The pitiful part was that Yumi couldn't make a retort.

Part 3.

“Second-year wisteria class’ Kanina Shizuka-sama? Oh, the chorus songstress?”

Yoshino-san immediately answered, in the second-floor conference room of the Rosa Mansion. Plus, she even groaned, “Rosa Canina because her name is Kanina,” so Yumi was impressed. Tsutako-san was probably hoping for that sort of reaction from Yumi.

“Yoshino-san, do you know her well?”

“No. But she’s pretty famous.”

“... I see.”

She could only nod. In Yumi’s case, she didn’t really remember anyone she didn’t actually come in contact with.

“She’s pretty, with long hair. She did a vocal solo of Aria during the school festival, don’t you remember?”

“I was probably eating curry with Sachiko-sama.”

“That’s right.”

Yoshino-san laughed and shut the windows. While their onee-sama were attending the election management committee’s explanatory session, the two of them cleaned the room, so they kept the window open despite the cold weather.

“Shall we take a break?”

Yumi stood up without waiting for an answer and flipped the two teacups over. The electric kettle was making bubbling sounds, and hot steam escaped from the little hole. The water had just finished boiling.

“A rest.”

Yoshino-san revolved her shoulders. It was right after classroom cleaning, so they'd been running around cleaning all day. But they couldn't help it, the Mansion with spider webs wasn't a proper sight. The two sisters of boutons pondered over what they could do to help their onee-sama and decided that, at the very least, they could make it so their onee-sama would be able to sit comfortable, and undertook, not quite a major cleaning, but a pretty decent amount of cleaning. They'd done most of the cleaning prior to the year's end, so this was more of the surface-area cleaning.

“Yoshino-san, would you like coffee?”

“Yes. And plenty of powdered milk, please.”

“OK.”

Rosa Foetida brought a collection of stick-coffee as a gift during the second-semester closing ceremony, saying she was sharing part of her New Year's gift, so the Rose Mansion drinks were currently extraordinarily rich. Yumi first placed a stick of coffee, milk, and sugar into each cup, and as per request, placed an extra milk stick into Yoshino-san's cup, and added an extra sugar stick into her own. Then, she poured boiling water into the cups. Because it was just the two of them, that was it. They wanted to limit how much washing they'd need to do, so they didn't use a spoon to mix. Plus, the process ended up mixing the coffee pretty well, anyways. Of course, it didn't need to be said that they didn't use a tray, either.

“The election management committee's explanatory session, what do they do there?”

Yumi mumbled, absent-mindedly. As they'd finished cleaning, when she sat down in her chair, it felt like all of the exhaustion crept up at once. I don't want to do anything more, was how she felt.

“When, and how they’ll hold the elections, for one. How candidates should sign up. What violates the election process. I guess they explain those things?”

“Mmm.”

Sounds difficult, Yumi thought.

“What do you mean, mmm, you know we’re going to go through it next year?”

“What!?”

“Get a grip, Yumi-san, we’re becoming bouton in April.”

“Umm... that’s true-”

After she nodded, she started, “Wait.” There was, of course, the matter of becoming a Rose down the line, something she’d taken pains to not think about, but the situation was different now because of Rosa Canina, wasn’t it?

If they lost in the election, then Rosa Chinensis next year wouldn’t be Sachiko-sama. And when Kanina Shizuka-sama becomes the new Rosa Chinensis, her sister would be the bouton, so there was the possibility that Yumi’s next two years would change dramatically.

“Yumi-san, you can’t possibly be thinking that Sachiko-sama might lose, can you?”

On the other side of the vapor rising from the teacups, Yoshino-san looked at her, menacingly.

“Shimako-san is like that, too, but you shouldn’t have that kind of passive attitude. When someone challenges you, you stand and take it. If we, the bouton’s sisters, become fainthearted, there’s no way our onee-sama can fight full strength.”

“Oh, yes.”

She'd been lectured, without realizing it. But it was true, she'd imagine for a moment she and Sachiko-sama living a normal school life. Not the upperclassman everyone admired, but just her "onee-sama." It actually sounded kind of nice.

"If you're considered the successor, you're supposed to win the election. So try losing to some independent newcomer. Yumi-san, how're you going to cheer up your onee-sama as her little sister if things came to that?"

You're right, is all she could say. So in truth, she needed onee-sama to win.

When they finished slowly sipping down their coffee, the three boutons returned to the Rose Mansion.

"Would you like a drink?"

While Yoshino-san washed the used cups, Yumi walked next to the table the boutons were sitting around and asked for their orders, like a good waitress.

"Do you want to drink bitter Japanese tea?"

Sachiko-sama asked the other two.

"Sounds good."

Answered Rei-sama. Shimako-san said she didn't care. The three of them looked tired.

"Bitter Japanese tea."

When Yumi repeated the order, Rei-sama added, "Cups are fine."

"I didn't think Rosa Canina was going to be lady Kanina Shizuka."

They had probably walked through the school hallways, the stairs, and other such places without saying a word. After seating themselves on familiar chairs and ordering drinks, the boutons relaxed themselves and began discussing. While they poured bitter tea, Yumi and Yoshino-san pointed their listening antennae in their direction.

“I don’t really know, but she was the one who sang Aria at the school festival, correct? She looks very different from then.”

Yumi thought, “Hmm, hmm, so that person did an image-change over the winter,” when she heard Shimako-san’s words. However, she also realized that the Aria songstress was famous indeed.

“Cutting her hair short during the winter of her second year, is just like Rosa Gigantea. Like she’s carrying on a tradition.”

“You don’t say!”

She wasn’t Sachiko-sama, but even Yumi thought, “You don’t say!” Because if someone looks up to Rosa Gigantea that much, then they would be an adherent to Rosa Gigantea, and then you would assume that sort of person wouldn’t issue a proclamation of war to the Yamayurikai staff. People cut their hair all the time, even without any reason.

“Come to think of it, didn’t Kanina Shizuka-san’s name come up as a potential sister for Rosa Gigantea, way back then?”

“Yes, there was such a rumor.”

As the two second-years conversed, the three first-years simultaneously went, “What!?” It’d happened at least a year ago, so of course, it was their first time hearing this.

“Is that true?”

Yoshino-san didn’t even wait to place the teacups in front of each person, instead rushing toward the table with the tray.

“Just a rumor, Yoshino-chan. After all, it didn’t turn out that way, did it?”

Sachiko-sama and the other two took their cups off the tray.

“Yup, yup, it was just the Lillian Kwaraban running off with a story again.”

“... Oh, was that all?”

Of course, Rosa Gigantea en bouton, Shimako-san, sat there in the midst of them, so that was proof enough. The newspaper club apparently took a poll on who was likely to become Rosa Gigantea's sister.

Yumi and Yoshino-san took their own cups and sat next to their respective onee-sama. The green color of the Japanese tea looked exceptionally bitter, so in Yumi's case, she diluted it with water from the pot. The others, however, sipped it deliciously.

“She looked a bit like Shiori-san.”

Everyone was quieted by Sachiko-sama's sighing comment. Everyone knew about Rosa Gigantea and her heart-breaking split with her friend.

“Shiori-san aside, she stood out since middle school, so I actually even assumed she would be a Rose Mansion resident at some point.”

Because she was a traditionally beautiful person, and there was no one that wouldn't be intoxicated by her singing voice. –Rei-sama explained, about Kanina Shizuka-sama. However, the current Rosa Foetida's preference was “rare goods,” so the handsome youth who was invincible with a shinai, Rei-sama, ended up becoming her little sister.

“Had Shiori-san not been here, would Rosa Gigantea have asked Kanina Shizuka-sama to be her sister?”

When Yumi asked, Sachiko-sama pondered, “I wonder.”

“Before she met Shiori-san, Rosa Gigantea didn't make contact with other people. Plus, she became the Rosa Gigantea of now solely because she met Shiori-san.”

“Ah... I see.”

Anyways, Rosa Canina, or Kanina Shizuka-sama had also come to the election management committee's explanatory session.

The deadline for registering candidacy was some time later, but they explained the process leading up to the election today. Anyone could participate. The school made numerous broadcasts for people intending to announce candidacy during classroom breaks, so today was supposed to be the first time the candidates would see each other.

“There were a number of wisteria class students following her around. Rosa Canina, Rosa Canina. It was not a pleasant sight to behold.”

“But, she is alone.”

Hearing Sachiko-sama, Shimako-san replied.

“I understand. But, it’s discomfoting, that’s all.”

She likes what she likes, she hates what she hates. –Very like Sachiko-sama.

But does that mean Kanina Shizuka-sama is fascinating enough to have her own contingency of supporters? Yumi still couldn’t consent to that knowledge. Maybe she was still dragging the concept of the “black rose” along.

(Discomfoting.)

She poured hot water into a small teapot and added seconds to everyone’s cup as she thought. If Sachiko-sama was discomfoted, then she was discomfoted, too.

As Sachiko-sama’s sister, she couldn’t forgive anyone who would strain onee-sama’s beautiful face.

What do you think?

Part 1.

Before long, the election was formally announced.

The election management committee hung up posters throughout the high school buildings, announcing the schedule leading up to the election. Voting would take place on the last Saturday of January, and three days before that, on Wednesday, the candidates would give their speeches.

The candidate registration deadline was a week before those speeches, so there was still some time, but Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama completed the formalities as soon as the receptionist was ready, and received 20 sheets of Kent paper, for posters, and a white cloth they were to place over their shoulders during the speech presentation. The two second-year boutons were not the only ones to quickly declare their candidacy- Rosa Canina did the same.

For now, the three were the candidates. What was Shimako-san thinking, as she was still dilly-dallying. They weren't going to be elected based on the order with which they signed up, so it didn't really matter. But if she wanted to appeal her dedication, she should register quickly. –Even Yumi, being a complete newbie to elections, thought that much.

One lunch break, a week after the election announcements, Yumi went to the library, remembering something. It wasn't an especially important reason. But, she thought, she might as well finish looking up Rosa Canina at the library, plus she hoped she could see that upperclassman again.

“Oh, gokigenyou.”

And as expected, she was sitting at the reading room lending counter.

“What brings you here? Researching roses again?”

Yumi noticed it before, but she felt again that this person was mellow, or well-mannered with people. Basically, she felt good to be around.

“Well, yes.”

When Yumi nodded, she spoke to another student behind the counter, then left her place and followed Yumi to the back of the reading room.

“Um, but aren’t you in the middle of work...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it.”

But still. The other student was glaring at her with a vicious scowl. Didn’t that mean she really shouldn’t have left?

“I thought Yumi-san might come back later, so I looked up a few encyclopedias and marked two or three down.”

She said, with a clear voice, as they walked.

“Zealous work habit?”

“Not really. I’m usually stuck at club after school, so it’s like filling time. I’m around in the morning and at noon a lot.”

“But, supporting a first-year with her research?”

“Oh. That was just by chance.”

When they walked to the shelf with encyclopedias and picture books, she picked out a few books and handed them to Yumi.

“You can’t take them out, so read them here.”

“Yes. ... umm.”

But before Yumi could thank her, she covered Yumi’s mouth with her fingers.

“It would trouble me if you thanked me. I’ll feel even guiltier.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll find out, soon enough.” With that, she left.

(What...?)

Soon enough-, Yumi was confused.

Nevertheless, she took her books, placed them on a nearby table and glanced at the counter. The student who’d glared at her earlier was now complaining to the girl.

Maybe it really was bad that she left her spot-? She pulled out the seat, while she thought, and sat down. Then, the student seated next to her spoke in a low voice.

“Traitor.”

“What!?”

“When’d you become friendly with the enemy?”

When she looked to the side in surprised, she saw Yoshino-san.

“What are you talking about? Enemy?”

Traitors, enemies, she used harsh words, but Yoshino-san wasn’t particularly angry. Rather, she looked filled with curiosity, edging her seat closer and whispering.

“Feigning ignorance? Of course I mean Rosa Canina when I say enemy.”

“Wait. Why would looking up Rosa Canina be treachery?”

“Then Yumi-san came to the reading room for investigation, too? I didn’t think you were the type to do that.”

“‘Too?’ Then Yoshino-san came to research Rosa Canina too?”

“Of course. ‘Know your enemy’ first.”

But Yoshino-san didn’t seem to care for the books in front of her. Like Yumi, the books in front of her were non-borrowing books, but they were like, Edo-period pricings, or maps of ninja mansions. How did that fit into research?

“Mmm.”

Folding her arms, Yumi tried to re-arrange her mind. But she still didn’t understand.





“Umm, Yoshino-san, have you made a mistake?”

“What?”

“Our conversation.”

“What?”

Yoshino-san seemed to have finally realized, as she noticed the books Yumi had brought, and her “what?” was followed by, “No way.”

“The ‘Rosa Canina’ Yumi-san is researching is the rose?”

Of course. Yumi was looking up the rose. Then Yoshino-san’s reaction, of course, meant-.

“Then, what? Yoshino-san is researching Kanina Shizuka-sama!?”

“Exactly. What are you looking up the rose for, now, Yumi-san?”

You’re so slow, Yoshino-san seemed to say, as she wagged her index finger like a metronome. Which meant Kanina Shizuka-sama was in the reading room.

“What, where!?”

“Idiot.”

When Yumi stood up, Yoshino-san dragged her down. Ah, that’s right, it wouldn’t be a stakeout if they looked so obvious.

“Yumi-san-”

“What?”

When Yumi answered, Yoshino-san suddenly seemed to become exhausted, sprawling over the table.

What happened? She wasn't moving. Is she okay? She looked alright after the heart surgery, but did she feel-

“Yoshino-san?”

When Yumi placed a hand on Yoshino-san's shoulder, worried, Yoshino-san turned her face toward her and looked extremely disappointed.

“... I didn't know. I didn't think Yumi-san wouldn't know what Rosa Canina looks like.”

“Wh, why!?”

After all, she didn't recognize Kanina Shizuka-sama in the reading room, but the reading room was expansive, so it wouldn't be surprising if she'd missed her. But Yoshino-san sighed and shook her head.

“Because, the upperclassman who lead Yumi-san here, that was Rosa Canina.”

Part 2.

Indeed, Yumi had no idea what Rosa Canina looked like.

Tsutako-san had brought a photo, but it was a complete hidden picture, as there were obstacles in the way, on top of the crazy posture Tsutako-san had to place herself in, so it was a surprisingly blurred picture. And she wasn't able to get close enough to take other pictures, so there was no photo that could confirm her face. Rosa Canina's supporters were tightly guarding her, was one of Tsutako-san's biggest problems right now.

“I saw a photo of her at the school festival, but it was a distant shot, and she was wearing make-up, and her hair was long, and the lighting was awkward so I couldn't see how she looked.”

So that “no idea what she looked like” was more like she’d never seen Rosa Canina in person. Well, no, she’d seen her in person, but she didn’t know that was Kanina Shizuka-sama.

“Mmm.”

Yoshino-san nodded, well, things happen. She seemed to understand that Yumi simply saw her as a kind, librarian upperclassman.

But, really.

She couldn’t believe that kind person was Rosa Canina.

Because Rosa Canina was an enemy of Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama and Shimako-san. Yumi wished Rosa Canina would have been simple to spot, like a villainous pro-wrestler. Like Tsukiyama Minako-sama, from the newspaper club, cackling, “ohohohoho,” that sort of upperclassman. Of course, then that image is completely different from a songstress.

(I see.)

Everything started fitting together. That student wasn’t angry at her colleague for leaving her spot, but was instead showing animosity at Yumi. If the sister of Rosa Chinensis en bouton was happily standing by Rosa Canina’s side, things weren’t as amusing.

She glanced at the counter. That student was definitely still standing vigilant. Of course, she’d probably noticed Yoshino-san, too, so two of the sisters of bouton sitting in the reading room was suspicious.

“Yumi-san, how about looking at the encyclopedia, while we’re here?”

Lunch break would end soon. Yoshino-san placed her books back on the shelf.

“If you miss this chance, it could be difficult coming back to the library until after the election.”

“You’re right.”

Nodding at Yoshino-san's pertinent advice, Yumi took the first book in hand. As she flipped through, her fingers stopped at one page.

(What?)

A tag was placed on one page, so that you couldn't see it if you closed the book. But that page was loaded with pictures of roses.

“Did she really?”

Incredulously, she removed the tag, and under it was a bright red rose, one that also was in the encyclopedia at home. To its side, read: “Koushinbara / Technical name – Rosa Chinensis.”

(Rosa Chinensis was a Koushinbara...)

This time Yumi looked straight at the counter. This had to be a message to Yumi by the person who placed the tag there. And if that was the case, it had to be Kanina Shizuka-sama. After all, she mentioned she was looking up roses, and said she couldn't even find Rosa Chinensis in her book at home.

(Shizuka-sama, was it you?)

But she wasn't at the counter anymore, so she couldn't ask.

(But, why?)

Relying solely on the tags, she flipped to the next page. As she expected, there was a tag in each of the three books she was given, right on the page with Rosa Chinensis.

“Yumi-san, still?”

“Hold on.”

Right before the third book completed its chapter on roses, for the first time, there were two tags in one book. And Rosa Chinensis had already been mentioned.

Then, what?

What was that tag pointing to?

Deep down, Yumi knew. It wasn't Rosa Gigantea nor Rosa Foetida. There was going to be a picture of Rosa Canina.

She carefully peeled the tag off. As she expected, in katakana, the caption under the tag read, "Rosa Canina (ロサ・カニーナ).

However, the photo.

"..."

It completely betrayed Yumi's expectations.

"Why?"

Confused, she looked at the page before and after. An inexplicable motion.

"What do you mean?"

But the person who could answer that question was gone.

Yumi calmed herself down and looked at the page again. And she confirmed the truth with her eyes.

"It would trouble me if you thanked me. I'll feel even guiltier."

Her words sprang back to mind. And she finally understood what they meant.

"... I've been had."

Yumi, like Yoshino-san a few minutes ago, felt exhausted. Now she really didn't know what kind of person Kanina Shizuka-sama was.

A beautiful, kind librarian.

An extravagant second-year who declared war on the rose boutons.

The chorus songstress, who sang Aria with a beautiful voice.

And one more. “Incredibly boastful,” needed to be added to that list.

Rosa Canina wasn’t a black rose.

It was a cute rose, with five beautiful, pink petals.

Part 3.

Onee-sama sighed.

Secretly.

Staring at something in the air.

“Onee-sama, would you like another cup of tea?”

“I’ve had enough.”

But she’d been rubbing her finger along the edge of the empty cup for some time.

“Shall I massage your shoulders?”

“No need, they’re not stiff.”

Nevertheless, she was massaging her own shoulders.

Sachiko-sama had been strange as of late. She didn’t know how she was during class, but when Sachiko-sama sat in the Rose Mansion, she was always spaced out. Like she wasn’t being responsible for her own words or actions.

Her mind was wandering. –That phrase fit this Sachiko-sama perfectly.

Ten more days until the election. Right after registering candidacy, she'd made the election posters and submitted them to the election management committee, answered interviews for the newspaper club, and did other things in her packed schedule, so she might have been finally showing her exhaustion. At least, that's what Yumi assumed, at first, but when this continued for four or five days, it was clearly more troubling than just exhaustion.

“If you have anything you want.”

Unlike a government seat, or a mayoral election, street, or school speech presentations were forbidden. Which meant once you finished everything you needed to do, the candidate and her supporters were all left with simple boredom. The submitted posters would be put up by the election management committee, and the flyers with candidate public commitments were created and distributed by the election management committee. Of course, the candidate registration deadline hadn't passed yet, so they didn't seem to be in any hurry, yet.

As a result, the only thing Sachiko-sama could do with regard to the election was to write a draft for her election speech. But, what a heavy sigh. Her draft seemed to be progressing well, but in the blank spaces, it was like she'd been doodling while speaking on a phone, with random spirals and flowers having been drawn.

“Do you have any concerns?”

Despairing, Yumi asked. Yoshino-san and Rei-sama were still in the midst of creating their posters, so they were off in their own little world, shoulders hunched together. Shimako-san had still not come.

“It would be of no use telling it to you.”

Sliced in two with one swing.

On top of admitting that she had something bothering her, Sachiko-sama said Yumi wasn't worth discussing it with.

Of course, she had no confidence whatsoever she could help out with that concern, but she thought she could at least be a listener, so it was a shock.

"Shimako's pretty late."

Rei-sama mumbled, looking at the clock.

"She doesn't feel comfortable being with us. Every time she sees our face, she feels like she's being pressured to register for candidacy."

Sachiko-sama expressed a little bit of interest in that topic.

"Yumi. How's Shimako in class?"

"She didn't seem to look any different."

Sachiko-sama sighed heavily, this time to Yumi's answer.

"I see. I wonder what she's thinking."

And then everyone went silent.

Yumi didn't know what Sachiko-sama was thinking, either.

At least she might have been able to help with making the posters, but Sachiko-sama finished it all at home.

Sachiko-sama's mechanical pencil made meaningless motions on top of the draft page. What was she thinking?

Was she thinking about Rosa Canina, or something else?

With nothing to do, Yumi spun her cup around. They hadn't moved from their seats, but Sachiko-sama seemed further and further away.

Loneliness from not seeing each other, and loneliness by sitting next to each other.

What you can see, and the mind you can't see.

Yumi might be more heavy-hearted at seeing Sachiko-sama than Shimako-san.

Part 4.

By contrast, Rosa Canina's camp was extremely gaudy. She, or rather, the second-year wisteria classmates of hers, backed her up with extraordinary unity.

According to Yoshino-san, who went to observe them, it wasn't quite the level of a mass election prayer, but it was somewhat close. The classroom had posters reading, "O days until the election," and it was like an election office.

Apparently, only a few students actually participated at first, but because it began feeling like "you're not a classmate unless you support her," everyone ended up having to help. Of course, it was a bother to everyone who'd been a fan of Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama from the start, as it left them in a dilemma.

But despite everyone around her becoming excited, Rosa Canina, the protagonist, hardly did anything.

Yumi hadn't gone to the library since that day, because it felt uncomfortable, so she'd not seen Shizuka-sama. She did get a peek of her once, though, as she walked through the hallway, surrounded by her SP-esque classmates.

She wanted to interject, what kind of danger could possibly lurk in school, but she could sympathize with their desire to be part of the election.

What kind of person is Kanina Shizuka-sama-.

One day, after school.

After finishing her cleaning duties, as she pondered that, Yumi ran into the person herself in the hallway. And for once, she was alone. Not even the scary-faced librarian was with her.

“Gokigenyou.”

Shizuka-sama, upon recognizing Yumi, smiled and greeted her first.

“Go, gokigenyou.”

She hurried to respond. Even though they were standing on opposite ends of the battlefield, she couldn’t simply ignore an upperclassman. Even now, Yumi couldn’t help but think of Shizuka-sama as “Sachiko-sama’s enemy.”

Yoshino-san, upon realizing that the opponent was the person named Kanina Shizuka, basically inserted data into her mind: the person in front of you is an enemy. So she always looked at Shizuka-sama as a hostile. But Yumi was different, in that she met Shizuka-sama without knowing their standings. So the image of a kind upperclassman wasn’t one to fade easily. –Even despite the fact that she’d lied about Rosa Canina being a black rose.

“Cleaning duty for the music room?”

“Oh, yes.”

Seeing the music score in Shizuka-sama’s hand, Yumi immediately grasped the situation, “Oh, that’s right.” She was heading to her club activity, which would take place in the music room.

And she understood why there were no classmates or colleagues with her.

“It’s been a while.”

Shizuka-sama didn't show signs of resuming her walk toward the music room. Speaking to Rosa Canina in the middle of the hallway leading to the music room. It was a situation screaming for misinterpretation.

But unfortunately, Yumi didn't have the courage to simply cut off their conversation and say "farewell" to an upperclassman.

"Um, you're quite early."

She didn't know what to say, as Shizuka-sama stared at her, so she simply blurted out something that could do no harm nor good.

"Yes. When we have a club meeting, I hurry here as soon as I'm finished cleaning. Because I love the empty music room."

"Oh, is that so."

When she answered, Shizuka-sama laughed bitterly, lowered her eyes, "I knew it."

"Yumi-san never took notice of me, after all."

"Eh?"

"When we met in the library, I thought, oh dear."

"Umm."

But did she mean? She tilted her head to the side. It sounded like they'd been relatively close friends in the past, or something.

"No, nothing special happened. But I remembered you quite well. Because I met Yumi-san several times as you cleaned the music room. We even exchanged greetings a few times."

"Eh, really!?"

It was a sort of discourtesy to have not realized at all. Yumi was so surprised that Rosa Canina seemed to sigh, despondent.

“I’m sorry.”

“No problem. We’ll call it even, after I told you a lie. The flower, Rosa Canina, you did see it, correct?”

“... Yes.”

“That was a small retribution to Yumi-san for not remembering me.”

Shizuka-sama giggled mischievously.

According to her, one of her classmates was knowledgeable about flowers, and upon hearing “Kanina,” thought of Rosa Canina. And the student council election was why the nickname managed to stick, despite the deep-rooted tradition of calling each other by their names. The three candidates for the Roses each had their own names, as in Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Rosa Foetida en bouton, and Rosa Gigantea en bouton, so it was Shizuka-sama’s supporters’ way of responding to that. But Shizuka-sama herself wasn’t too fond of it.

“A black rose would have been much cooler. Because pink in Japanese is “peach-colored,” or “cherry-blossom colored,” or else in some way needs to use the name of another plant, right? And I think that’s impolite to roses.”

“Oh, I see.”

The red rose, white rose, and yellow rose sounded nice, but peach rose and cherry-blossom rose was strange. But light-crimson rose also sounds like a joke. Through it all, Yumi thought Shizuka-sama was quite playful, pondering about such a thing.

“If Yumi-san didn’t remember me, either, I suppose that means I don’t stand out.”

Shizuka-sama looked away, out the window and at a withered branch high up on a tree.

“No, no. Everyone around me knew of Shizuka-sama. ... I don’t really have much data on other people... I only recently found out about the names of

the Roses. And I found out that Rei-sama and Yoshino-san were relatives during the ‘Yellow Rose Revolution.’ ... Oh, what am I saying.”

She was flustered. She was trying to cheer Shizuka-sama up, but instead it turned into a confession of her embarrassing points.

“I see.”

Shizuka-sama giggled. Then continued.

“But, in Yumi-san’s case, Ogasawara Sachiko-san was special.”

“... Well, yes.”

“How enviable.”

Yumi didn’t understand yet why she was envious. But then, after a moment of thought, she realized, “Oh, maybe.”

“Um... excuse me, Shizuka-sama do you have a sœur?”

“I’m single. There were many that proposed to me when I was a first-year, but I turned them all down. And I don’t feel like I absolutely must have a little sister.”

“...”

Come to think of it, she’d been spoken of as a candidate for becoming Rosa Gigantea’s little sister, so at the very least, Shizuka-sama didn’t have an onee-sama this time last year. And so she’d remained free, and without a sister.

“But it’s nothing too unusual, is it? Toudou Shimako-san also turned down Sachiko-san’s proposal, and Rosa Gigantea also didn’t have a sister when she was a second-year.”

“But.”

Yumi couldn't believe someone this pretty would manage to remain alone this whole time.

People weren't entirely about their faces, but you couldn't just forget the face, either.

Katsura-san said, some time ago, that picking sisters was a race. Which would mean, when looking through the crowds of younger students whom you weren't familiar with, the face would be one of the most crucial, outstanding points. Even Rosa Gigantea mentioned she knew of people who "chose based on looks."

"Huh? Yumi-chan?"

As she thought of Rosa Gigantea, all of a sudden she had an auditory hallucination of Rosa Gigantea. But when she turned around, the real Rosa Gigantea stood not ten meters behind her, so she became doubly surprised.

"Well, I shall be going now."

Shizuka-sama tapped Yumi's shoulder in a "see you" way, and walked toward the music room. Perhaps she was pressured into leaving, now that someone as grand as Rosa Gigantea had appeared.

Well, Shizuka-sama was an enemy of the boutons right now, and Rosa Gigantea, the onee-sama of Shimako-san, would be included as an enemy, so it might have been the prudent course of action to call it a "near-miss" and escape. —Though she spoke to Yumi quite defenselessly.

"Was I a third wheel?"

Said Rosa Gigantea as she crept closer, and then she said something unbelievable.

"What a beautiful girl. Yumi-chan's friend?"

"Eh!?"

"My, what a voice. The student that was with you just now."

“... Is that a joke?”

It wasn't like she could say anything about other people, but Yumi thought it was strange she wouldn't remember the name of someone who was her sister's enemy.

“A joke?”

But Rosa Gigantea was serious. She was seriously pondering over why Yumi would wonder if it was a joke. “Rosa Gigantea was a comrade.”

Yumi slid into a relieved smile. Here was another person who didn't store data on other people. Right, not everyone in the world is perfect. Everyone has things they're weak at.

Yes, yes, she agreed with herself. Then the chorus members started gathering.

“Let's go somewhere else.”

Yumi took Rosa Gigantea's hand and walked down the closest stairs. It wouldn't be proper to gossip about the enemy leader while standing next to their headquarters, the music room. Even if the enemy leader was amicable, her supporters were terrifying.

“What is it, Yumi-chan?”

“That was the rumored Rosa Canina.”

After going down two flights of stairs and stopping in front of the science room, Yumi faithfully reported.

“Oh.”

And then Rosa Gigantea added, “What's that?” Perhaps you begin to neglect the world around you when you're busy studying for exams? Although not knowing Shizuka-sama's face meant the problem was present long before the exams.

“Um... Rosa Gigantea? You don't recall hearing Kanina Shizuka-sama's name?”

“I feel like I've heard it somewhere, but I don't remember. Though I don't think I'd have left her unchecked if she was that beautiful. ... Oh, I get it, the second-year that wanted to take part in the Yamayurikai audition, it's her?”

Combining Yumi's hasty departure from the music room and the remark about the current gossip, Rosa Gigantea seemed to have pieced the puzzle together.

“Well, yes.”

But that's an election, not an audition.

“Mmm. She's pretty, so it's all good, right?”

After making sure the science room door was locked, Rosa Gigantea leaned against it.

“Wait a second, Rosa Gigantea, that's not how you're supposed to react!”

Rosa Gigantea's simple statement was screaming for complaints.

“How was I supposed to react?”

“You're supposed to cheer for your sister, Shimako-san!”

Isn't that obvious? Yumi puffed her chest.

“Maybe. But Shimako isn't announcing her candidacy, is she? So wouldn't it be better to let someone who wants to, do it?”

“No! I want Rosa Gigantea to persuade Shimako-san.”

“Did Shimako say she wanted me to persuade her?”

“Of course she wouldn't.”

Why would that Shimako-san complain to Yumi?

“Right? Then I won’t talk to her about it.”

“Why!?”

“Third-years are fundamentally supposed to stay out of the election process.”

“Huh?”

“That’s why the election takes place while the third-years are busy with exams. We don’t even get to vote, why would we bother ourselves with it? Even I’m studying for exams, okay?”

Why would they bother themselves with it? Oh, Rosa Gigantea.

“Why are you so cold?”

When Yumi whined, Rosa Gigantea laughed.

“I can’t help it. Every student titled a “Rose” at Lillian went through this period without depending on their onee-sama.”

She said proudly, but of course, when they ran, they were the only ones up for election, so it wasn’t right, comparing their situations equally.

“Think about it. Student presidents need to lead the students. And the election tests your ability to do that, right? You fail, if you need to rely on your onee-sama. Shimako is my sister, but I’ve never once thought she must become Rosa Gigantea after me. If she wants to, she can find a way to do it. If she doesn’t, she doesn’t have to run. It’s simple.”

“...”

Well, that was true. But it was hard to explain, that even if it didn’t make logical sense, they were sisters, so they needed to support each other.

“So are you saying to just silently watch?”

Truth be told, she was disappointed. She was so disappointed she wanted to cry.

Because they were sisters, Yumi wanted to support Sachiko-sama. Onee-sama and little sister, they were on different sides of the relationship, but she believed Rosa Gigantea would feel the same way. So she had a bit of hope. That Rosa Gigantea would show the way.

But she was wrong. Rosa Gigantea was completely unreliable.

“I never said you have to just watch.”

Like she was talking to a child, Rosa Gigantea peered into Yumi’s eyes, rubbing her head.

“I’m just saying, I’m not going to do anything. So if Yumi-chan wants to stick her head into things, that’s Yumi-chan’s prerogative.”

“What?”

“See you.”

Abruptly cutting the conversation off, Rosa Gigantea stopped leaning against the science room door and stood up.

“See you? Rosa Gigantea, didn’t you have something-”

Yumi called out to Rosa Gigantea, who’d quickly begun walking away. Come to think of it, she’d never asked why Rosa Gigantea was in school, and near the music room, which was on the far, far end of the school, during such a busy time.

“I was looking for Yumi-chan because I wanted to ask some questions, but I’ve gotten the general gist of what was going on, so it’s alright.”

Bye bye, waved Rosa Gigantea as she turned the corner in the hallway and vanished.

“What was that?”

She couldn't figure out what people close to her were thinking.

For some reason, Yumi felt like she was thinking that almost all the time lately.

Part 5.

Shimako-san announced her candidacy after school, the day of the deadline. Apparently she turned in her registration 15 minutes before it closed.

She was so punctual that she never once forgot her homework, and always submitted her reports with plenty of time to spare, so her persevering until the very end was proof that she agonized over the decision for a long, long time.

She expressed a clear fighting will when she first heard about Rosa Canina, but she changed her mind, or perhaps more accurately dragged out making the decision until the very end, and finally fortified her resolve to run. Some criticized her for her indecisiveness (of course, the second-year wisteria-class students), but this was a result of her personal agonizing for ten days, so in a way it didn't matter whether she signed up on the first day or the last day.

“You're not running?”

During lunch on the last day, Yumi invited Shimako-san to the Rose Mansion for lunch. There were too many outsiders in the classroom, and because of the seasonal weather, eating outside wasn't an attractive option. Fortunately, no one seemed like they were on the second floor of the Rose Mansion. Yoshino-san's class after lunch was physical education, so she was probably eating lunch in her classroom. And without Yoshino-san, the probability of Rei-sama coming dropped. For the Yamayurikai staff, there

were days where they gathered at the Rose Mansion for lunch and plenty of days where no one came. Of course, before school festivals, for instance, when there was a compulsory meeting, everyone would gather.

So even today, there was the chance of someone coming in later. But they could deal with that then. Yumi was prepared to persuade Shimako-san, today, for the first and last time, as her classmate.

She could drop out any time, but at least she could sign up to buy herself more time, was the only direction Yumi could think of taking the conversation. But, Shimako-san had probably delayed her decision even to this day because she didn't want to make such a careless decision, so it would be difficult to sway her.

"It's quiet."

Placing the earlier question aside, Shimako-san narrowed her eyes at the winter sunlight coming in through the window.

"... Actually, I'm perplexed."

After a minute, Shimako-san finally answered.

"May I ask why?"

"I haven't been able to sort things out, myself."

"Yes."

Even so, she urged. Shimako-san placed her empty lunchbox on the big handkerchief she was using as a luncheon mat, wrapped it, and then began speaking.

"I don't know about Yumi-san, but I didn't become Rosa Gigantea's sister because I wanted to become a student president."

"Me, too!"

Yumi was about to stand up and lean into Shimako-san, who was sitting across from her.

“Me, too. I just like Sachiko-sama-”

“... Yes. Yes. Even if onee-sama wasn’t called a Rose, you would accept her rosary. And that is the proper sisterly relationship.”

“Shimako-san, you like Rosa Gigantea, too, don’t you?”

“Yes. And that’s why I assisted the Yamayurikai, to be of some help to her. And that’s why, once onee-sama graduates, I’ll feel no obligation toward the Yamayurikai. I did feel like I would follow in onee-sama’s footsteps, but that was because I assumed, as usual, no one else would try to step in.”

“Eh-!?”

When Yumi cried, Shimako-san chuckled and said, “I’m sorry.”

“To me, an “attachment” is just a burden. I simply wish that I can keep myself as carefree as possible, so that I could go anywhere whenever I want.”

“Then, you dislike school?”

“I don’t dislike it. ... But it’s not a question of dislike or like.”

“Hard.”

“Really. And because this is my personality, my father sends me to school, worried about me, and onee-sama probably pulled me into the Yamayurikai for that reason. I don’t mind being alone, so I naturally gravitate toward isolation. That’s why people that know me well always try to force me into groups.”

Finally, although it was just a tiny bit, Yumi began to understand Rosa Gigantea and Shimako-san’s relationship. Rosa Gigantea understood Shimako-san “well.” And because Rosa Gigantea understood her well,

Shimako-san accepted her rosary. Because in her sixteen years of life, not many understood her like that.

“Then, wouldn’t it be better if you remained in the Yamayurikai?”

“If that is onee-sama’s intent. That’s what I felt, at first. As I walked in and out of the Rose Mansion, as I assisted the Yamayurikai, as I was called Rosa Gigantea en bouton by people I didn’t know well. Before I knew it, my bonds to people had grown. And sometimes I think fondly of that sensation. And I became Yumi-san and Yoshino-san’s friend.”

“I’m also glad I became Shimako-san’s friend. That’s why I want to be together more. Please, why isn’t that enough?”

“I never said it wasn’t, did I? But, there are other things I think about.”

“Like?”

“I’m not the type of person who can lead students.”

“What are you talking about?”

She laughed. Shimako-san was so reliable, everyone adored her, she was kind, and was good at studying, so when someone who could be the perfect anecdote for a leadership book says something like “I’m not the type to lead students,” that meant no one could try to become a Rose. As proof, Shimako-san was scouted by the Yamayurikai twice. –Rosa Gigantea and Sachiko-sama.

But Shimako-san wasn’t laughing.

“That’s not all.”

She looked serious.

“What else?”

“Lillian, without me.”

“Eh?”

“If I had not entered Lillian Girls’ Academy.”

“What do you mean?”

Shimako-san entered Lillian through a middle-school exam, Yumi remembered.

But still.

People like Yumi, who’d been tossed into Lillian since Kindergarten, from when they first became conscious of the people around them, those people wondering about “if” they hadn’t come to Lillian made sense. But at twelve, you’re certainly conscious of the world, so your own will is acting in some way, however small.

“I mean, if.”

“If.”

“Yes. Then Rosa Gigantea wouldn’t have chosen me as her sister, correct? Even if it may have taken time, she may have chosen a second-year student, as tradition holds.”

“And that would be Shizuka-sama? So Shizuka-sama is fitting to be the next Rosa Gigantea?”

That’s wrong, Yumi thought. It was true Rosa Gigantea may have taken quite some time to find a little sister, after her heartbreaking separation with a dear friend. But it wasn’t a question of time for choosing a student a year younger than her. It was because there was no student “capable of becoming her little sister.”

“Indeed. She may have never found a sister.”

Shimako-san nodded, and continued.

“Then let’s imagine a scenario where she never had a sister. Then what happens?”

“What happens?”

“In the end, it becomes an election. Just like it is now.”

But that didn’t mean she had to give up her seat without fighting.

“But in reality, Shimako-san is here.”

“That’s why it’s an ‘if.’”

But what did she want to say, talking about an “if” scenario? It was like she was hinting that the “if” could turn out to be true.

“Shimako-san, you’re not leaving, are you?”

Shimako-san curled her lips up a bit, to that question.

“I do not desire such a thing, but-”

But she never finished her sentence. Shimako-san stopped.

“Is someone there?”

“What?”

Yumi also listened carefully.

Creak, creak, creak, she could hear the stairs creaking.

“But, who?”

She was still inexperienced at figuring out whose footsteps they belonged to, but she could somewhat generalize. It was in the group of Sachiko-sama, Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida. Or maybe like a hurried Yoshino-san or Rei-sama. That was about it.

Her tempo, and the way she placed her weight into her footsteps was very conscientious, or prudent. It only creaked about a third as much as Rei-sama's footsteps. Only Shimako-san walked like this, but she sat in front of Yumi.

When she finished climbing the stairs, she knocked on the biscuit-shaped door.

It was an effective staccato. A pretty sound, like a xylophone.

But, strange.

The usual members would simply open the door without knocking. It felt like she was waiting for them to respond.

"I wonder who it is?"

Yumi, sitting relatively closer to the door, answered, "Coming," stood up and placed her hand on the knob. Really, she was still thinking lightly about it, assuming it was someone from the Yamayurikai who was carrying something heavy and couldn't spare a hand for the door, or something. She didn't think hard enough to realize such a person wouldn't really be able to knock, either.

Click clat.

The door opened with a familiar, click clat sound.

"_"

She opened a jack-in-the-box. Someone unexpected stood there.

"Gokigenyou, Yumi-san."

Rosa Canina, or Kanina Shizuka-sama, stood up straight and presented a polished smile.

(What's going to happen-!?)

Yumi forced a smile as she screamed inside.

Shimako-san is in the room!

Part 6.

“I tried calling out downstairs, but no one responded, so I let myself in.”

After being lead to the middle of the room, then recommended a seat, and then sipping on the tea she was given, the visitor asked, “Was it a bother?”

“Not at all. Actually, we’re sorry. When we’re on the second floor, we often don’t notice anyone knocking on the door. So it helps us greatly that you walked in.”

Incidentally, it was Shimako-san that lead Shizuka-sama into the room, pulled a seat out for her, and then poured her tea. Yumi was frozen in place, stuck between Rosa Canina in front of her and Rosa Gigantea en bouton behind her, so she was rendered immobile.

Shizuka-sama was alone. Without being accompanied by her classmates or her colleagues, she entered the Rose Mansion, the nesting place of her enemies. She probably came, not minding how many could be inside. As proof, she was actually surprised it was so empty.

The visitor took another sip, very elegantly.

Someone other than the usual members sitting at this table and sipping tea. It felt mysteriously natural, but it also felt a bit odd.

She blended into the room, like she was in a place she was used to being in. Even so, a part of Yumi refused to believe what she saw. Like she was trying to find a mistake, and only Shizuka-sama was out of place. It might have just been that she was unused to the sight.

But if Shizuka-sama won the election, this would be the norm. But it was still difficult to imagine that with the addition of Shizuka-sama, someone else would vanish.

“There’s not much time, so I’ll leave the pleasantries aside. I came here today to speak to Shimako-san.”

Somehow managing to thaw herself, Yumi looked at her wrist-watch. There were only about fifteen minutes left until lunch break ended.

“Then, shall I... shall I take my leave?”

“That would be unnecessary. On the contrary, please remain, Yumi-san.”

Shizuka-sama stopped her. Shimako-san nodded, too. They were both calm. They looked so amicable to each other that it was difficult to believe they were actually enemies. Of course, it may simply be the people around them believing them to be enemies.

Yumi sat down in a seat that saw them from the side. In truth, she was more on Shimako-san’s side, but she felt it would be awkward if she chose a side here. Plus, she couldn’t say it aloud, but she didn’t dislike Shizuka-sama. Rather, she leaned more toward liking her.

“May I ask what you want?”

Shimako-san said. It felt like her drifting personality had vanished, and now she was completely locked in.

“You are aware, I believe, that I’ve announced my candidacy for the student council.”

Shizuka-sama began.

“Yes.” Shimako-sama smiled, gently. In this case, Yumi was basically just a spectator, so she kept silent.

“But it’s not out of nonconfidence in you or the other boutons. Will you believe me?”

“Of course.”

Shizuka-sama didn't decide, “I'll do it,” because she felt Shimako-san and others weren't up to the task, in other words. And Shimako-san basically replied, “I know that already.” Yumi knew that much, too. Actually, she hadn't even thought about the possibility of people being dissatisfied with the boutons, so the confirmation took her by surprise.

“Then, why have you not registered? Wouldn't you have registered with Sachiko-san and Rei-sama if I hadn't?”

“I may have.”

“The deadline is today, after school.”

“Yes.”

Shimako-san understood that perfectly well, without the need for Shizuka-sama to point it out. Because Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama seemed to be rushing her every time they saw each other. And she was just talking about it with Yumi.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don't think I am obliged to tell you.”

Surprisingly, Shimako-san used a harsh tone. Of course, this reaction was wildly different from when Yumi asked essentially the same question.

“... Indeed.”

While Shizuka-sama made a “how unexpected” face, she didn't show any signs of backing down as she continued to speak.

“I have come simply to present you with another road, because you seem to be lost.”

“Road?”

“I think you’re hesitating over running because you’re not the same age as the other boutons. You’ve done well as a bouton despite being a first-year. And now, after working harder than anyone else, I can also sympathize if you feel overwhelmed by the prospect of working even harder for your second, and third, years.”

“What do you want-”

Shimako-san’s angelic smile became a bit strained. I’m glad I’m not the only one that can’t see where this is going, Yumi thought.

“If you want to become like Yumi-san, use me. –That’s all.”

It was still beating around the edges, so Shimako-san rephrased Shizuka-san’s words quite directly.

“Are you saying I should step aside and let you become the Rosa Gigantea next year?”

(What!?)

She didn’t think Shizuka-sama would say such a thing, so Yumi almost jumped out of her seat in surprise. You’re joking, aren’t you? was how Yumi felt as she searched Shizuka-sama’s face, but she, in turn, simply stared at Shimako-sama, with a benevolent smile.

“Of course, but I have no intention of kicking you out of the Rose Mansion. Fortunately, I have no sister, either. Once Rosa Gigantea graduates, I have full intention of welcoming you as my sister.”

“Shizuka-sama, you liked Shimako-san!?”

She was trying so hard, but finally Yumi burst out.

“No, Yumi-san. Shizuka-sama isn’t saying that.”

Please stay silent a bit longer, Shimako-san seemed to scold, so Yumi zipped her mouth shut again. Shizuka-sama didn’t confirm nor deny that, but she glanced at Yumi and giggled, so it proved Yumi’s logic was off. She

thought Shizuka-sama had ended up running because she wanted Shimako-san as her sister, but apparently that was wrong.

“I don’t think it’s a bad proposal for you, at all.”

Shizuka-sama repeated. Yumi nodded inside, “That’s true.”

That way, Shimako-san automatically became Rosa Gigantea en bouton again. And she would take up the same duties in the Yamayurikai. And then when she became a third-year, she would become Rosa Gigantea. It sounded great. It sounded too great, so it was scary.

“Think about it.”

The fifth period bell rang, so Shizuka-sama stood up.

“Wait, please.”

Shimako-san followed her.

“I have not made up my mind about running, yet, but I must answer this now.”

“What is it?”

“No matter what happens, I have no intention of becoming your sister. Of becoming anyone’s sister. My onee-sama is Satou Sei-sama and Satou Sei-sama alone.”

“... I see. I understand.”

Shizuka-sama simply nodded, quietly.

And then, Shimako-san announced her candidacy after school. In the end, you could say Shizuka-sama took it upon herself personally to blow away all of Shimako-san’s worries. And only Yumi, who’d been present at their conversation, knew about that.

Raison d'être for sœur

Part 1.

“Why do you look so depressed?”

In front of the Rose Mansion, someone tapped Yumi's shoulder from behind.

“... Rosa Chinensis.”

The face she hadn't seen in a while was the same as usual. Kind, composed, welcoming you to cling to her while crying, and certainly belonging to the type of person whom you could devote everything to, that sort of face.

“You'd come?”

“Oh, I attend school almost every day. I've just decided to spend my extra time on studying, until I'm through with exams. ... It's cold, shall we go in?”

Rosa Chinensis opened the door and invited Yumi. She was trying to gather herself enough to go in, so she was relieved she could relax and enter.

She'd gone to the Rose Mansion after school almost every day. But lately, Yumi found it difficult to come. And today even moreso.

The time had come. The Wednesday, two days before the election. In the afternoon today, the election speech presentation assembly would take place in the stead of classes. But Yumi didn't know what she was actually supposed to do. And it was frustrating. And it was the first time she'd felt this way, so she didn't know how she was supposed to deal with it. And no one was around to help her. And then she depressed herself, and fell into a bottomless pit with no way to get herself out.

And on top of it all, Rosa Canina and Shimako-san's problem was, well, to be a bit impolite and harsh, simply adding to the filled bucket, so her head

was a mess. Yumi wanted the election to be over and done with quickly, or else she felt like her body would fall apart, too.

It was hard to tell if Rosa Chinensis could tell how Yumi felt, as she rhythmically climbed the stairs.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

How light.

And after climbing, the biscuit door on the right opened.

“Onee-sama.”

As soon as she saw Rosa Chinensis, Sachiko-sama rushed over.

“Gokigenyou, Sachiko. Have you been well?”

“Yes, of course.”

(-What?)

Seeing Sachiko-sama answer, Yumi couldn't believe her eyes.

Sachiko-sama was smiling.

She'd come in after Rosa Chinensis, so she was able to see Sachiko-sama's face the whole time. And Yumi'd watched Sachiko-sama the past two weeks. So she could affirm it. Yes, it'd been a while since Sachiko-sama had looked this lively.

(Why?) Rosa Chinensis magic.

(Because she saw Rosa Chinensis...?)

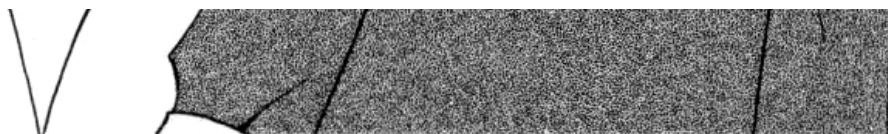
It felt like she'd been bitten by a fox.

In the second-floor room was also Rei-sama, Shimako-san, and Yoshino-san, the people who'd usually been in the room as of late. But it was just

tens of minutes away from the speech presentation, so they were all busy with the final checks, like making sure their over-the-shoulder signs wouldn't slide off, or double-checking their speeches. Rosa Chinensis said she didn't need tea, so Yumi sat down next to Sachiko-sama.

It felt extremely boring. Even though she tried greeting her, Sachiko-sama never glanced in Yumi's way. She was always looking at Rosa Chinensis.





(Well, they have been together longer.)

But with such a different reaction, she couldn't help but begin wondering why she was here. Such dangerous thoughts slowly invaded her mind.

Rustle rustle.

Her heart felt like it was being laid waste.

Dying up like a worm that wandered onto hot asphalt, turning into something unrecognizable from its original form.

“Well, we'll be going ahead, then.”

Rei-sama and Yoshino-san announced to everyone before they left.

Yumi thought.

In Yoshino-san's case, because they were blood-related cousins, she wouldn't be bothered so much by being left alone. Of course, Rei-sama was so glued to Yoshino-san that such a thing would never happen.

“I should go, too.”

Shimako-san stood up, too. Of course, Rosa Gigantea wasn't by Shimako-san's side. But Shimako-san was the same as always.

(I'm such a fool.)

There was no point in comparing with other people. Sisterly relationships were all different, and she knew that already.

Only the crimson rose family remained in the room.

But it became depressing being there, so Yumi stood up, too.

She hoped that maybe Sachiko-sama would pay a bit of attention to her if she stood up, but it was futile. Like they were filling up their lost time,

Sachiko-sama and Rosa Chinensis kept conversing, and they didn't even notice Yumi leave the room.

(I'm still such a baby...)

She thought, as she walked down the stairs with a slow tempo.

She wanted to be some help to Sachiko-sama, she would proudly say, but in the end, she was the one that was seeking something. To be necessary to Sachiko-sama, proof of it. Because she would be crushed by anxiety without it.

So childish.

If she really liked Sachiko-sama, she wouldn't need any reparation. If Sachiko-sama could peacefully laugh, with Rosa Chinensis by her side, she should be happy, too, as her sister.

But.

If she were that splendid a person, she wouldn't be troubled like this.

Yumi opened the door and stepped out.

What's the point of a little sister? She wanted to cry.

Inhaling and exhaling the outside air. She lost track of how long she stood there, cooling her head.

The courtyard in the middle of winter, even without any snow, was frigid, and when she felt resigned to going back into the Rose Mansion because her arms and feet were getting cold, the door opened from the other side.

"Yumi-chan?"

Rosa Chinensis wouldn't miss noticing that Yumi's eyes were a bit red.

"Come here."

Rosa Chinensis embraced Yumi's shoulder and took her, not to the second floor, but to the room to the side of the first floor. This room had less windows and didn't get much sunlight, so it wasn't used much. So, naturally, it became a storage room for the Yamayurikai.

"Tell me what happened."

She placed a hand on Yumi's shoulders and peered into her eyes. Rosa Chinensis saw through everything.

"Were you scolded by Sachiko, before I came?"

No, Yumi shook her head.

"Then, did someone say something?"

"No, it's just... I."

"Yumi-chan?"

"I can't do anything for Sachiko-sama, even though I'm her sister."

But then, Rosa Chinensis tilted her head to the side.

"Can't do anything? You have to do something?"

"Because."

She didn't know how to continue. Because Rosa Chinensis easily did what Yumi couldn't do, no matter how hard she tried.

"It's alright, Yumi-chan."

Rosa Chinensis cackled. Like a bright, summer sky.

“Listen to me. Little sisters don’t have to worry about that, because they’re little sisters.”

“What?”

Yumi’s “because they’re little sisters” and Rosa Chinensis’ “because they’re little sisters” were similar but seemed to point to radically different stances.

“If you want to help, just act normal. And when Sachiko says she wants something, just do that.”

“... That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

With rock-solid confidence, Rosa Chinensis concluded.

“I’m telling you this, with a long history of being an onee-sama. Understand?”

“... Yes.”

“Okay then, I’ll be heading out now. Yumi-chan, stay next to Sachiko.”

“Rosa Chinensis?”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll be watching in the assembly hall.”

Smiling like a flower, she left the room, first. She was no match for the third-year “aunts,” the first-year Yumi thought.

She didn’t know why, but she felt much better.

When she opened the door and stepped out, Sachiko-sama had just come down.

“You were gone far too long for a simple hand-washing, so I was worried.”

“I’m sorry.”

After bowing her head once, she was about to follow Sachiko-sama, but she thought it wouldn't be good to drag along such a fundamental concern, so Yumi squeezed every ounce of courage she had and spoke to Sachiko-sama from behind.

“Onee-sama, I-”

“What?”

Sachiko-sama slowly turned around. Even without *Rosa Chinensis*, she looked like the kind, strict onee-sama of usual.

“I, what can I do? I want to do something for onee-sama, but I couldn't think of anything, and I felt so powerless, and I-”

Sachiko-sama looked surprised, and then laughed. It was hard to tell if she was happy or thought it was absurd.

“You had such a cloudy look lately, was it because you were thinking such a thing?”

“What?”

She thought Sachiko-sama was disinterested, but apparently that was the wrong assumption. Even if it wasn't to the same degree as usual, Sachiko-sama was paying attention to Yumi.

“... Oh dear.”

And she started giggling again. Unable to suppress her laughter, Sachiko-sama leaned against the Rose Mansion door and spoke.

“We were troubled by the same thing, as *sœur*.”

“Same... what?”

When Yumi asked, Sachiko-sama confessed, “Actually...”

“I, too. Was agonizing over onee-sama.”

Whether she could do anything for Rosa Chinensis. But in Sachiko-sama's case, Rosa Chinensis was battling with universities, so there was absolutely nothing she could do. So it was dreadful.

Like, letters or phone calls of encouragement might just be adding pressure.

Or like, maybe waking up early on the day of exams to make Rosa Chinensis lunch.

Or like, bringing one of those popular exam charms from a shrine would be hackneyed.

While she was thinking of ideas, she became depressed at how powerless she was. And then Rosa Chinensis stopped by the Rose Mansion, and when she saw how cheerful Rosa Chinensis was, it instantly cheered Sachiko-sama up, too.

“Rosa Chinensis told me, ‘I came to see your face.’ And I felt so much better. Because it made me think of what I expect from my own sister, Yumi.”

“Me...?”

“You just need to be by my side. I just need a sister that will watch me, by my side. Just be with me, and when I become lonely, hold my hand.”

As she said that, Sachiko-sama grabbed Yumi's hands and held them tight.

They were warm. But Yumi no longer felt like onee-sama's warmth was lonely. Now, the warmth melted her anxiety, her impatience, and her self-hatred away.

“Rosa Chinensis said, the elder sister is the one that wraps up and protects. And the little sister is the support... and I feel the same.”

“The little sister is the support?”

What an emboldening way of saying it. The little sister is the support. With that, she felt prepared to go to the far ends of the world together. Then, she

wanted to become a sister who, just by being there, her onee-sama could feel at peace. That became Yumi's goal.

"But, onee-sama is truly amazing."

The dog, now in good humor after receiving kibidango[2], excitedly followed Momotarou. First, they were to head to the sanctuary, on Onigashima.

"Why?"

"Because you weren't worried about the election."

"Election?"

Sachiko-sama laughed as they walked, brimming with confidence.

"Don't worry. I'll never lose."

And for that, she needed to defeat the speech presentation in front of her, first. And three days later, the big, decisive battle would take place.

Part 2.

By the way, in the meantime.

Two shadows passed each other in a place Yumi wouldn't even think of going.

"Rosa Canina, was it?"

In front of the Maria-sama statue at the fork in the ginkgo tree pathway, a girl with growing, graded hair casually swaying stopped, and turned to the girl she'd just passed.

“Are you late, too? Or are you waiting for someone?”

“I was waiting for you, Rosa Gigantea. I knew you would come, no matter what, today.”

The girl with cleanly cut hair said. She was still wearing her indoor shoes. Like she’d gone to the third-year wisteria class looking for her, found out she hadn’t arrived yet, and run out like that.

“... An ambush. Then wouldn’t it have been better to wait for me in front of my classroom, or the building entrance?”

Even if it was after noon, it wasn’t the weather to wait outside for a long time without a coat. There was a slight breeze, too.

“I didn’t know if you’d go straight to the building.”

“You know me well.”

She’d come solely for the speech presentation. So there was a high probability she would only stop by the Rose Mansion, or even just go straight to the sanctuary, where the speeches would be given.

“You know, there’s no point in talking to me about the Yamayurikai election.”

“I have no intention of making such a request.”

“Then, what?”

Her hands still stuffed into her school coat pockets, Rosa Gigantea listlessly asked. By contrast, Rosa Canina spoke, solidifying her resolve.

“The election date. After school, on Saturday, after the results are posted, may I see you here?”

“After the results? Not if you win?”

“Regardless of whether I win or lose. May I?”

“Mmm.”

After some pondering, she said “ok” and kept walking.

And after a few steps, she turned around, and said, “Shouldn’t you hurry, too?” while pointing to the sanctuary, but Rosa Canina simply nodded, “Yes,” and showed no signs of moving.

For a while, she simply gazed at Rosa Gigantea, walking away.

Part 3.

By the time Yumi and Sachiko-sama arrived at the sanctuary, the sanctuary seats were filled with the student audience.

According to the election management committee chief, possibly related to the fact that seats were unreserved, there were students that even skipped on lunch to grab seats immediately after fourth period, so the first-year and second-year students were quite interested in the election.

The extra spice of the fourth candidate, as opposed to the regular three-person election, had stirred things up. Of course, it was basically a test to see if the bouton really had what it took to become the next student presidents.

Rei-sama had already arrived at the sanctuary stage’s wing, and she was partaking in friendly chat, surrounded by Yoshino-san and Rosa Foetida. The third-years had no obligation to take part, so they were allowed to go home in the afternoon, but Rosa Foetida came, after all. Come to think of it, Rosa Foetida loved amusing things, so there was no way she would miss this.

Rosa Chinensis sat waaaaaaay in the back. The revitalized Sachiko-sama didn’t have a particular need for onee-sama’s protective warmth.

(And Rosa Gigantea-)

She hadn't been seen today, Yumi thought as she glanced around, and just then, Rosa Gigantea entered the stage wing and marched straight to Shimako-san.

“Onee-sama...”

Shimako-san stood up from her candidate-reserved seat and whispered. Maybe she thought Rosa Gigantea wouldn't come.

“Shimako.”

Rosa Gigantea took one final step and touched Shimako-san's cheek. Everyone thought she would give encouragement or sympathy. But there's Rosa Gigantea, betraying all expectations.

“I didn't coerce you into this. You decided this. So if you win, take responsibility, all the way to the end.”

Everyone who heard it must have felt like jumping out of their seats in anger.

“Um, are you sure that's the right thing to say, Rosa Gigantea?”

Without thinking, Yumi interjected. Now it was obvious she was listening in on their conversation.

“My my my, Yumi-chan's spirits have been revived! What, my words are wrong? How so?”

“Umm, you're usually supposed to say ‘good luck’ or ‘I'm cheering for you’ or something like that.”

“But that would be a lie.”

“A lie-”

It sounded like Shimako-san wasn't supposed to win the election. When Yumi was about to object, someone touched her shoulder.

"It's alright, Yumi-san."

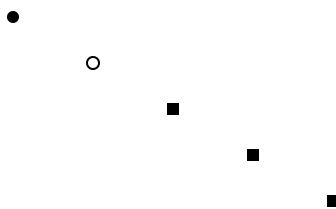
Shimako-san smiled.

"You see. Onee-sama's words just now, they're the most inspiring words to me possible, right now."

"Eh?"

When she hurriedly glanced at Rosa Gigantea, she was already looking in a completely different direction, and said, "Who knows?" Yumi took it all back, she would never understand these two.

Ten different types for ten pairs, one hundred different types for a hundred pairs, they say every sibling is different. But Rosa Gigantea and Shimako-san were definitely in a class of their own. Yumi could say that with utmost confidence.



The speech presentation began at one o'clock, after the election management committee chairman gave his quick speech.

First, the committee chairman's greeting, then every candidate went on the stage, and gave a speech in the order of their registration. None of the

candidates had their speeches given by someone else. They all chose to give their speech with their own voice.

While listening to Sachiko-sama's speech, Yumi kept cheering, "Do your best," "Do your best." Even though she didn't want to miss a single word of the speech, she was too excited to actually listen.

She wanted to cry again, but she held her hands tight and stopped herself. If she cried, her sight would be too blurry to see Sachiko-sama.

(Do your best...!)

Before she went up to the podium, Sachiko-sama grasped Yumi's hand and said.

"Sit there, and watch me."

So she had to watch carefully. Sachiko-sama's hand trembled just a bit in Yumi's hand. So the least she could do as her sister was fight here, with her. Because Yumi was Sachiko-sama's support.

In the first row, they weren't doing anything gaudy, but Rosa Canina's classmates had secured all the seats and wore hachimaki[3] with "Rosa Canina" written across them. Well, her name-value was considerably less than that of the boutons, so Yumi could sympathize with their need to appeal Rosa Canina as much as possible, but she knew it was added pressure for Sachiko-sama to give the speech directly in front of her rival's fans.

But she never once looked down at her speech as she spoke, looking straight at the spacious sanctuary and drawing in the audience with her echoing voice. Sachiko-sama was always fantastic, but she was absolutely glowing as she stood in front of the audience. Her voice was so filled with confidence it almost made a lie of the trembling hand.

Onee-sama was wonderful.

No matter what happened with the election, Sachiko-sama was Yumi's Rosa Chinensis. The deep-red petals were beginning to blossom. That's how she felt.

A modest secret

Part 1.

Saturday.

After fourth period, the first-years and second-years used homeroom to cast their ballots.

There were two election management committee members in each class. After confirming that every ballot was collected, and every absent student was taken account of, the ballots and the attendance sheet was placed in specific envelope and taken to the counting room.

The counting room was occupied by the election management committee from the beginning of the year, and was about half the size of a classroom. This room was always fluctuating in what it was used for and by whom, as at times it was the headquarters for the school festival executive committee, while other times becoming the headquarters for the athletics festival executive committee, and other times even used for the culture club's exhibit room. Incidentally it was next to the lecturers' room.

The ballots were counted that day, in the witness of teachers.

The counting was done using a primitive method. A person would read the vote out, and another person would mark it down using a 10⁴⁰ system. Still, they had plenty of workers, so even with a second run to confirm numbers, it was finished quickly. After students finished cleaning and ate lunch, the votes would already be tallied.

The election management committee gave themselves a bit of a buffer for delays and said they would announce results at two in the afternoon. So they'd agreed to eat lunch at the Rose Mansion and standby there until the results, but Yumi was so restless she could only eat half of her mother's lunch.

Yoshino-san and Rei-sama also seemed to be nervous, as they routinely sighed as they slowly ate lunch.

Of course, when listing off other people, you get to Sachiko-sama who was completely relaxed. By the time Yumi finished cleaning duty and got to the Rose Mansion, Sachiko-sama had finished her lunch and was sipping tea. “Sorry, I ate already.” The big shots are really different, Yumi thought, and as she admired her, the time became one forty, and without anyone needing to say anything, everyone stood up, ready to leave.

And despite these circumstances, Shimako-san didn’t come to the Rose Mansion, because she had a regular meeting for the environmental consolidation committee. She said she should be done by two, so Yumi assumed she would go directly to the announcement.

She also didn’t see the Roses anywhere. Yoshino-san said *Rosa Chinensis* and *Rosa Foetida* stopped by before Yumi came, but they returned home, saying, “I have a good idea what the results will be.”

But, even if you had a good idea, wouldn’t you normally stay around to confirm your suspicions? Of course, “normally” wasn’t something that applied to the Roses.

And no one knew where *Rosa Gigantea* was. Even on the day of the speech presentations, she’d skipped morning classes, so no one knew if she was even at school today. Plus, she didn’t seem to care about the results anyways.

Many people had already gathered around the bulletin board in front of the sanctuary. Yumi thought the results would be posted in front of the counting room, but she understood why it would be presented here. If this many students gathered in the hallway, there would be big “don’t push” wave of panic. That’s how crowded it was. The middle school and high school acceptance announcements were also posted here, but it was nowhere near as crowded for those.

Everyone simply waited for the election management committee to arrive. Did it need to be said that there was no obligation to look at the results?

Nevertheless, all of these students had remained of their own volition.

“Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, please.”

When they noticed the two candidates, the students parted like Moses and the Red Sea, leading the protagonists to the board.

“Here, the sœur, too.”

“Oh.”

Yumi and Yoshino-san were also pushed forward.

Shimako-san was already there, and she forced a smile. What a pity. Yumi was sure Shimako-san just wanted to take a secret peek at the results. But because they were giving her a better view out of courtesy, she couldn't turn them down. In the end, everyone other than the candidates themselves were more excited. And Yumi felt like that was the sort of thing that would never change.

Speaking of everyone else being excited-.

“Where's Rosa Canina?”

Her supporters had already shown up, but Shizuka-sama was nowhere to be found.

“I wonder where she went, the results are about to be posted.”

The library girl sighed, “Sometimes she just goes off somewhere on her own.” Just then, the election management committee chairman and vice-chairman arrived with a rolled-up poster.

The results were about to be announced.

Part 2.

The voices of the students felt far away.

Could the Maria-sama statue hear them, too, surrounded by her little forest?
In the midst of the green, she silently clasped her hands together.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Rosa Gigantea said to the person in front of the Maria-sama statue.

“No problem.”

I wasn’t waiting that long anyways, that person replied. But no one knows how long she actually waited.

“I thought I would definitely get here earlier. ... So I’m actually more than a bit surprised?”

“I’m the one who requested this.”

Rosa Canina smiled.

“Regardless of whether you win or lose the election-. You did say that on Wednesday, but I didn’t think you meant it this much.”

Rosa Gigantea looked at the election results and hurried here. So if Rosa Canina had come here even earlier, it meant there was no way she’d seen the results.

“I could always ask Rosa Gigantea about the results, if I wished.”

“Wanna hear?”

No, Rosa Canina shook her head.

“It’s that important? The reason why you called me here.”

“Yes. To me, more than anything else.”

Looked at with serious eyes, for just a moment, the smile vanished from Rosa Gigantea's face.

And then silence.

Rosa Gigantea flipped her hair, exhaled, and then began speaking again.

"Can I ask one thing? Was the election just a lead-in?"

"In the beginning. But then I began thinking it wouldn't be such a bad thing to do Yamayurikai work, either."

"Why?"

"I don't know... Maybe it was because I became a bit close to Yumi-san, and it became oddly fun. Plus, I was able to become engrossed in something together with my classmates. I'd actually never taken part in an uproar like this. My life has always been about singing, and so I placed a great deal of effort into my club activities during the school festival, too. So I'm happy I was able to take part in regular school life, completely unrelated to singing."

"I don't think the student president election is really 'regular school life,' though, don't you think?"

"Oh, my, that's true."

"Right?"

Rosa Canina giggled at Rosa Gigantea's remark, and Rosa Gigantea was also lead to laugh.

"... I think there are many paths toward the future. So, maybe I could live a completely different life by taking a rounded path. For a moment, I thought, maybe that could be nice."

"No matter how many paths there are, you can only walk one."

Rosa Gigantea pointed out. Rosa Canina seemed to understand everything, though, as she simply said, “Yes,” smiled, and nodded.

“Testing my luck, I suppose? I believe Sachiko-san took part in a gamble during the school festival, correct? I simply mimicked it. I didn’t want to leave without doing anything.”

After a breath, Rosa Canina said:

“I’m going to Italy.”

“Italy?”

The topic suddenly went overseas. Even Rosa Gigantea had to struggle to keep up. But Rosa Canina’s tone wasn’t that of a “quick overseas trip.”

“To study music. In truth, I was supposed to fly there the moment I finished middle school... but I delayed it by two years.”

“Why?”

“Because you were here.”

Rosa Gigantea’s eyes opened at Rosa Canina’s immediate response.

With completely different expressions, they stood, looking at each other.

“I’m so happy... Rosa Gigantea, just for a moment, I wanted to see my reflection in your eyes, like this.”

“What...”

“Because you never did notice me. I even grew my hair because your hair was always long.”

Her hand, hovering near her shoulder, motioned nostalgically about her old hair length. She probably didn’t cut her hair a year ago, at the same time as Rosa Gigantea, out of obstinacy. Because her hair was unrelated to Shiori-san.

“I’m sorry, I never noticed. Your hair was long?”

Rosa Canina crumpled with laughter at Rosa Gigantea’s blunt words.

“I loved even that part of you.”

She looked at the white sky, above the gingko trees.

If you focused enough, you could see the thick, heavy clouds slowly but certainly drifting.

“If you won, what were you going to do?”

Rosa Gigantea asked.

“Of course, I intended to remain. It would just be delaying my departure by a year. ... But let’s stop with the “if,” please? Toudou Shimako-san will be a wonderful Rosa Gigantea.”

One step.

Rosa Gigantea closed the distance between them.

“You’re fascinating, Rosa Canina. If we’d met earlier, we may have become good friends.”

“But you wouldn’t have made me your sister?”

“Did you want to?”

But Rosa Canina clearly shook her head.

“I’m not Shimako-san.”

“... Rosa Canina.”

Another step.

They were close enough that their breaths landed on each other.

“Will you call me Shizuka?”

“Shizuka.”

Rosa Gigantea lifted Shizuka-sama’s chin with her hand and kissed her cheek. Extremely close to the lips. In front of Maria-sama.

“A farewell gift.”

Leaving those words, Rosa Gigantea walked away. Shizuka-sama, left alone, was looking the other way, so she didn’t know what sort of expression she had, but even Yumi could hear her soft whisper, “Thank you.”

Part 3.

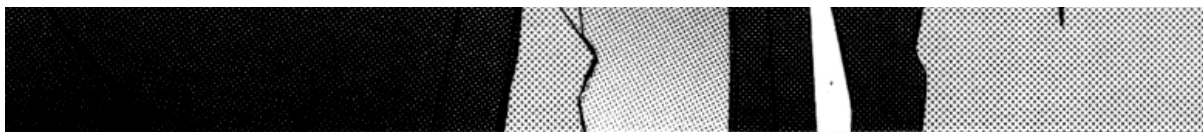
Rosa Gigantea took a few steps, then reached into the thickets by the ginkgo trees, grabbed the uniform collar and dragged the peeping tom out.

“Hey. Peeping is bad.”

“I’m sorry, I was just passing by, and-”

Yumi, caught, desperately tried to explain herself.





Right after the results were posted, Yumi noticed Rosa Gigantea at the edge of the crowd of students. But Rosa Gigantea, after a quick glance at the imitation paper on which the names and number of votes were written, quickly left, so Yumi, after being cut off from Sachiko-sama and others, squeezed out of the crowd and followed after. The three boutons, having safely won their elections, were swept up in a storm of blessings, so they didn't seem like they could get out any time soon.

So, when she followed Rosa Gigantea, there was an unexpected preceding visitor, so she was immediately taken aback. And she hurriedly hurled herself into the hedge. Because it was a special atmosphere. Rosa Gigantea and Shizuka-sama.

“Well, I didn't mind being seen.”

As they walked back to the sanctuary, Rosa Gigantea prodded Yumi's head and laughed.

“I won't tell Shimako-san.”

“You can tell, I don't mind.”

“I won't tell.”

“You're persistent.”

“Of course.”

If Sachiko-sama kissed someone, even if it was just on the cheek, she wouldn't like it, at all. –Yumi thought. So she couldn't tell Shimako-san. No matter what.

In Shimako-san's stead, Yumi dragged Rosa Gigantea to the sanctuary by the hand, but in by pinching her hand a bit. She needed to feel a bit of pain.

The sanctuary had actually been somewhat vacated by the time they returned. They became extremely excited, and then the wildfire had been

blown out. Everyone left in threes and fives. It was a Saturday afternoon. As the main event had ended, they had other plans to attend to.

And in the middle of a few remaining people were Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama and Shimako-san.

“Well, first of all, congratulations.”

Rosa Gigantea cackled, as she walked to them. The “first of all” was so unnecessary.

“Thank you very much.”

The three of them bowed.

“Looked like an easy victory.”

“Not entirely.”

Shimako-san shook her head and smiled.

For someone who wasn't as famous, Rosa Canina put up quite the fight. Of course, the results weren't especially close, but she had certainly been up to the task. You could say that much.

If Lillian didn't have a system of *sœur*, and the four candidates had been lined up at the same start line, Shizuka-sama may have beaten Shimako-san to become one of the Roses. Of course, that was an “if.” No one could complain about Shimako-san winning the election, and becoming a Rose in her second year was a brilliant achievement.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

She had no idea when Yoshino-san had gone round-trip, as she showed up carrying two peoples' coats and bags. And Rei-sama, upon seeing her, hurried over like a magnet, and took hers.

“Well, apologies for leaving early, but we have plans.”

Rei-sama and Yoshino-san lined up like ohina-sama[4] and bid their farewells.

“How enviable. Hasekura + Shimazu double celebration?”

Sachiko-sama said.

“Yes.”

Yoshino-san looked happy. She was constantly smiling, as if she herself had won.

“Well, see you all next week.”

“Gokigenyou.”

After watching the two of them walk down the gingko pathway, hands together, Sachiko-sama grabbed Yumi’s hand. “Come.”

“Onee-sama?”

“Let’s have Rosa Gigantea do something onee-sama-like, for once.”

She whispered, and pulled Yumi away. When they blended into the crowd of students and looked back, Shimako-san was surprisingly crying, and just as rare of a scene was Rosa Gigantea embracing her closely.

“It might be meddlesome, but sometimes you have to be over-considerate with them. She looks strong, but Shimako is just a first-year, like Yumi.”

She’s been so tense for so long, she has to be given space, sometimes, Sachiko-sama said.

“How about onee-sama?”

Yumi asked. If Shimako-san was just a first-year, Sachiko-sama was just a year older, herself.

“Me?”

She tilted her head to the side, thinking.

“Really, I may have been too tense, too. Then I shall have Yumi make me relax.”

“Okay!”

Yumi excitedly answered, like a puppy.

“I’ll do anything, go on.”

Not a lie, not an exaggeration, she thought she was capable of anything, right now. If onee-sama desired, she would bungee jump or go on a standing jet coaster, that’s how excited she was.

But Sachiko-sama was far more grounded, and made an extremely simple request.

“First of all, pour me hot tea at the Rose Mansion. And then let’s eat the remainder of our lunch together.”

“Huh...? Lunch, remainder?”

“Let me confess that I only ate half, too. I just wanted to look strong, in front of you.”

Ducking her shoulders, Sachiko-sama said, “So let’s eat together.”

“You made me regain my appetite.”

Nagakiyono

The first of January

Part 1.

“We’re thinking of going to Yamanashi.”

Everything started when my parents said that.

“Yamanashi?”

My brother, Yuuki, and I of course responded, as their children, “When?” “Why?” –etc. Placing a slight feeling of surprise into those questions.

Because that “We’re thinking of going to Yamanashi” proposal was given right when the countdown finally ended on the year’s end TV show, after my father pasted this amulet on the wall, one we got from some temple somewhere and were told we had to hang it up right as the year turned its page, and then we all said “Happy New Years!” That’s when he said it.

So, of course we were filled with question marks, because it was such a contextually out-of-place statement. We hadn’t even received our New Year’s gifts.

“Grandmother’s alone, apparently, this New Year’s.”

Mother said, sighing. –Well, when they mentioned Yamanashi it was obvious it was related to my aunt.

“But, aunt Taeko?”

Yamanashi’s grandmother was my mother’s mother, and she turned down offers to live with her children after grandfather died, stubbornly choosing to live alone. Luckily, mother’s sister, aunt Taeko, lived about 500 meters

away, so she went to check on her a lot, and they spent Christmas and New Year's, among other holidays, together, so they were able to breath easy.

“She won a trip to Hawaii through the year's end lottery.”

“A trip to Hawaii?”

The children sat up on the sofa. What? What? This is the first time we're hearing this.

“Right. An invitation for a family of four. And aunt Taeko's is a family of three, right? So they were supposed to take grandmother along, but she suddenly refused to go, and went home alone.”

“From where?”

“Narita.”

“... What a waste.”

I mumbled. After all, I'd never gone outside the country. But Yuuki, sitting next to me, poked my head.

“Idiot. Think about grandmother's welfare, first.”

“Ow. Mother and father are going to Yamanashi because she got home safely, right?”

“Well, true.”

Yuuki kept muttering. As kind as ever.

The considerateness that I forgot in mother's stomach had been secured by my brother when he was born. Not just his share, but what was supposed to be my share, too. So, sometimes he covers for me to the point of irritation. Like he's still trying to deliver lost goods from fifteen years ago. Even though he was a premature baby, his height and maturity was far past mine, and it was vexing to have to admit it.

But I'm glad Yuuki is a guy. If we both had to go to a girls' school, I'd always be compared to him. And since we're both the same age, it would be horrible.

"And so aunt Taeko called us about grandmother from the airport. We don't have to go the first three days of January, but she wanted us to check in on grandmother at some point. But father says we should go soon."

Of course, in this case, father was not the grandfather that had passed away, but rather my father, who was drinking beer right at the start of the new year.

"Because the elderly are worrisome."

He was deftly removing the peanuts from the pile of kakipi[5] on his paper plate. Father was fond of mother's mother. Because his parents died relatively early.

When he wanted to have filial piety, he had no parents.

You can't put a blanket over a tombstone.

That's father's saying. It made sense, but it was hard to appreciate, because both parents were quite lively.

"Then go."

Yuuki said, as he put all of the kaki seeds father had left onto his own plate. Even if they had different tastes, they still behaved similarly. As such, at the Fukuzawa household, kakipi was eradicated without any remnants.

"So, when're you going?"

"Today... well, the first day is busy, so probably the morning of the 2nd. The U-turn rush is brutal, though, so we'll stay one night and come back on the 3rd."

"How about you two?"

“Oh, I’ll pass. I’m staying over at a friend’s house the second.”

Yuuki said, without any hesitation. “Eh-!?”

“What do you mean, eh-. Yumi has no right to complain. Father and mother consented long ago.”

“What.”

“Nee-chan, you can just forget about me and go.”

“... Right.”

But going to a place like Yamanashi for one night was just going for the sake of getting tired. She would have preferred to stay home with Yuuki, but since he was going out, it was a different story altogether. It was too scary to be left alone in this gigantic, three-story house.

“How about Yumi-chan?”

“Ugh-”

They were probably going by car, so it wouldn’t bother them if she came along. And she didn’t see any other option. And it’s a bit impolite to say it so, but she could also check on grandmother’s health.

(But...)

She was perplexed when she thought about the possibility of the Roses inviting her while she was gone. Could there be an invitation? Of course, it was just a personal wish, but if that “maybe” became real, and she wasn’t around for it, she would definitely regret it.

“Can you wait on that?”

She pleaded her mother.

“Sure? But tell us by evening today, because we have to pack.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, Yumi-chan has plans, too?”

Father looked a bit lonely, “I guess once you become a high-schooler you find friends to hang out with,” so instead of answering “I don’t know,” Yumi simply giggled, “Eheheh” and poured him more beer.

Father happily chugged the cheer his daughter poured, reached into the pockets of his cardigan and handed a small pouch to Yuuki and I.

“Good luck, this year.”

We said, “Okay,” with our brightest, liveliest voices of the year, and accepted the pouches.

When I dashed to the kitchen, as if I was helping mother, and checked the contents, I noticed the New Year’s gift sum had risen a bit from last year.

Part 2.

I was up until one on New Year’s Day, but I was still awakened at seven o’clock by my mother.

But, this was customary in the Fukuzawa household on New Year’s Day, so I had to get up, rubbing my eyes.

Well no, actually, stumbling down while rubbing my eyes wasn’t allowed. First I had to brush my teeth, wash my face, and of course I had to change out of my pajamas. When I finally finished dressing myself, we were to gather in the only Japanese-style room in the house.

After all, we have to prepare ourselves for the upcoming year on New Year’s Day.

When we became middle-schoolers, the ban on watching Kouhaku Utagassen[6] was lifted, so ever since then it became customary to exchange “Happy New Years!” greetings deep in the night. Even so, we still maintained our tradition of waking up in the morning and once again exchanging greetings before eating our ojuu. Then we received a sip of otoso, and opened our ojuu.

“Alright, I’ll be taking mochi orders.”

When everyone placed their chopsticks on the ojuu food, Yuuki stood up and began taking note of how much mochi everyone wanted. At the same time, father stood up and walked to the kitchen. In our household, it was customary that grilling mochi and boiling soba was done by the men, so mother and I didn’t move. That said, it wasn’t like we were supposed to happily eat while waiting. In the meantime, we’d prepare the ozouni for the mochi, and set up oshouyu and nori.

“But his unusual obstinacy is such a bother.”

Whispered mother. Usually you could just toast mochi in a microwave, but mochi is better when it’s grilled on an iron, my father said, and so we did it the old way. As a result, the one who washed the irons with carbonized mochi was his assistant. Poor Yuuki, he was destined to become the victim of father’s obstinacy on New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day.

The living room had a television, like it was from a completely different era, and it showed things like the first sunrise of the year, a shouchikubai, or an announcer wearing a kimono. The morning newspaper that was placed in the sideboard after father had finished reading it was thicker than usual, being the New Year’s edition. And from those small differences from the normal day, you could feel that New Year’s Day was a relatively special occasion, I think.

And while we dug ourselves into the horigotatsu while eating mochi and osechi, and sipping tea, the New Year’s Cards would be distributed. Usually the postman would be riding around in a bike at this time of day, but during New Year’s, the job is instead taking by university part-time workers. So

even if a stack of postcards were placed in the mailbox, sometimes you never heard them coming, and you'd only realize it later.

It was the job of children to retrieve the New Year's Cards. –Or rather, more like a hobby. It was like trying to get a magazine you were waiting eagerly for. It was a pain to write them, but receiving them was a joyful occasion. Who sent me a post card? I wanna see! And so Yuuki and I alternated peeking out of the house and checked the mailbox every ten minutes.

After a number of whiffs, I coincidentally opened the door and saw the onii-san placing the stacks in our mailbox. Well, I say onii-san, but he didn't look like he was that much older than me.

“Thank you for your troubles.”

We greeted each other, and he handed me to postcards directly. There were two stacks. The part-time nii-san, before moving on to the next house, stopped by the mailbox a few steps down, and placed a stack into my father's office's mailbox. It was ten forty in the morning.

Me first, we probably looked like, as we scrambled into the house and began dividing the cards.

To father, to mother, to me, to Yuuki, and then to father's office, they were all mixed together. Oh, and a few that had been accidentally mixed in, that were supposed to be sent elsewhere. As a result, the postcards were split into six mountains, and piled up before each respective person.

“Yumi, read your cards later.”

Yuuki cautioned, not stopping. But even so, when you saw the name of who wrote you the card, wasn't it normal to want to flip to the back?

“Father, father, Yuuki, me, father, mother, father, father.”

When she resumed working, to catch up, this time she was warned, “Quiet.”

“Think it in your head, it's distracting.”

“Yuuki’s like a mother-in-law.”

“Anyone would complain like this if their son had a wife like Yumi.”

Giving up, I started saying, “father, father, mother, Yuuki,” in my head.

(Huh...?)

But when she split a card to Yuuki, she felt like the name on the card was familiar. And it stuck her mind because the card was to Yuuki. Yumi thought, most high-school cards were from classmates or club-mates, but it wasn’t a name she’d heard from Yuuki’s mouth-.

(Who was it?)

But she couldn’t double-check, because Yuuki stacked more cards on top of it.

She could have asked Yuuki, can I see who that was? But it would have been wasted effort if she’d been wrong, so she forgot about it. There’re plenty of people with similar names, after all. And if Yuuki asked her about a card sent to her, she wouldn’t feel too comfortable, either. Privacy is important.

Of course, almost half of the cards sent to our household were to father. And if you counted the cards sent to his office, how many is he receiving? It was overwhelming. Because, if you’re receiving cards, it also means you’re sending around that many, too, right? Becoming an adult is dreadful. Even our mother, a housewife, received far more than we did.

Having finished splitting the cards, Yuuki and I took our shares, split up a bit, and sat down on the sofa. It wasn’t like “whoever has more cards is more popular,” but it did put a bit of pressure on the other person. Luckily, we were about the same, judging from the thickness of our stacks. I was happy that the number of cards I received went up along with my New Year’s gift when I became a high-schooler. Even though I wasn’t a part of any club.

Instead of reading them in order, I looked for one name. Ogasawara Sachiko.

The person I love the most at school.

Silently apologizing to Yoshino-san and Tsutako-san, I skipped past their cards, and as I began to worry, “Maybe she didn’t send me one?” I found it.

“B, brushwork...”

Would it be called India-ink painting? It was a relatively simple postcard, with a plum flower painted using faint hues, and on top of it, with black India ink, “Happy New Year’s,” and “Best regards for the year,” and then the year, and then “New Year’s Day.” The little stamp pressed to the side was Sachiko-sama’s “Sachiko,” in a brilliant scarlet accent.

“How refined...”

When I remembered the card I’d sent out, my face felt like it was on fire. It was bad enough that I hurriedly wrote it because I’d forgotten about it until the second-semester closing ceremony, but the New Year’s card that I’d begged father to let me print off of his computer was rather scrambled and noisy. I should have just used a template that came with the word processor software, but I ended up adding a bunch of things, and in retrospect that was a bad idea. The letters were extremely fancy, and I used way too many colors.

Your personality showed in your New Year’s cards. I carved that into my brain.

The first phone call we received for the new year came when mother was hurrying me about my Yamanashi decision.

“It’s from grandmother.”

Wait right there, she scolded, before she picked up the receiver.

“Happy New Years. It’s Fukuzawa.” Her voice was an octave high. Oh, mother, her voice was in New Year’s mode, too.

“Ah, yes. No, not at all. Thank you for looking after her all the time. Has she been bothering you much?”

Wait right there, I’d been told, so I couldn’t return to my room. Plus, I’d finally finished writing the thank you cards, and had stumbled down the stairs to go to the bathroom, so the air conditioner in my room was still on.

(I hope it’s not a long phone call.)

I tried to reason out who the caller might be, by concentrating on the receiver. From the speech mannerism, I could tell it wasn’t grandmother. And it was someone “looking after” someone other than mother.

“I see. Please guide her in the future, too. ... Please wait a second. I’ll switch to her.”

Still holding onto the receiver, mother bowed toward the phone, pressed the hold button, and turned to me, “Yumi-chan.”

“Me?”

She wouldn’t say “please guide in the future” to a friend of mine. But I couldn’t imagine my homeroom teacher calling-.

(C, could it be...)

“It’s Rosa Gigantea.”

“Eh?”

“Rosa Gigantea, right? Satou-san. My, the Roses are so polite have such a proper way of speaking.”

“_”

I forgot to mention that mother was a graduate of Lillian Girls' academy. She was a regular student who never dealt with the Roses, but her admiration of the Yamayurikai staff was extraordinary. She would probably be shocked beyond belief if she were to see how the real Rosa Gigantea acted, so I didn't deny it, simply agreeing, "Yes, she's so wonderful."

"Hello, it's me."

"Ah, Yumi-chan? Did you hope for a moment it was Sachiko?"

"... No. Happy New Year's."

"Happy New Year! Kingashinnen! [Z] Bonne année! Boy, how joyous, how auspicious!"

"..."

Even in the new year, Rosa Gigantea's old-fashioned methods were still in good health.

"Did something happen?"

"I wanted to hear Yumi-chan's voice."

"Huh?"

"- Is a lie hohoho-"

"Did you call me to be the first to tease me?"

Rosa Gigantea might do it, seriously.

"Of course not. Getting right to the point, do you have any plans tomorrow and the day after?"

"What do you want?"

"I'm bored. Wanna go on a date?"

“Date?”

“Other people call it a hatsumoude[8].”

“I’ll go!”

I immediately OK’d it. This invitation was my wish. A hatsumoude with the Yamayurikai members.

And maybe I’d be able to see Sachiko-sama in a kimono.

“So, will it be the second or the third?”

“Are you open on both? Because it’s a one-night two-day lodging course?”

“Lodging?”

“- Though by lodging I mean at a friend’s house, so it’s free. But, it’s a sleep-over, so make sure you have your parents permission.”

“Friend’s house?”

“It’s a big house, but their family is out for the second and the third. So, we’re going to barge in and help out with house-keeping, kind of. You know, if the young people are happily partying the night away, it’ll ward robbers away.”

“W, wait a second.”

An unexpected development.

And it was far, far more enticing than staying at home or going to Yamanashi.

“Mother.”

I turned to mother, who was listening not two meters away.

“Can I go to the Yamayurikai lodging?”

“Lodging, on New Year’s?”

Mother looked dubious, at first, but I implored her enough that she finally reluctantly allowed me to go.

She’d allowed her son to go, so she probably felt guilty if she didn’t let her daughter go, too. After all, our household is based on the fundamental of “boys and girls are equal.”

Plus, Rosa Gigantea seemed like such a lady, that adults adore her. And so with a senpai like that, she doesn’t have to worry as much about me. Of course, if she knew how Rosa Gigantea really is, maybe she would worry.

Finally, the kicker was that I was already hesitant on going to Yamanashi. She was probably worried about the prospect of leaving me at home alone anyways, on a level totally different from “boys and girls are equal.” So me going to a friend’s house put her at ease. Either way, I’m the kind of daughter that’d go anyways, even if they were to tell me, “Don’t go,” so I’m sure that just added to her worries.

“Rosa Gigantea, she’s given me permission. I’ll participate.”

I jumped back on the receiver, panting.

“Roger. See you, then, we’re meeting at M Station tomorrow at two. In front of the convenience store before the ticket gates, you know what I mean?”

“Roger-”

She quickly took a mental note.

“Give mother my blessings. I’ll be taking care of her tomorrow, like that.”

“Yes. Then, tomorrow.”

After hanging up, I remembered I forgot to ask who else was coming. It seemed like I was definitely excited. I felt a bit inconsiderate, as she might have wanted me to call the other people and spread the word.

(I hope onee-sama's with us.)

Ahh, and as I thought such a thing, my heart really went into Happy New Year mode.

My brain was so filled with rapture that, even though Yuuki and I usually did rock-scissors-paper to see who put the thank you cards in the mailbox, this time I went ahead and did it on my own accord.

I felt bad for grandmother, but I thanked her for coming back from Narita.

The hatsumoude on the second

Part 1.

They say the population of Tokyo is going down, but I think overcrowding is a bigger problem in some areas than others, because there're tons of people in some places and almost no one in others.

Really, if you go to place that's just a housing district, it's quiet, like the world just ended, so despite walking almost seven minutes to the bus stop, the only living being I crossed paths with was a stray cat.

Maybe most people don't think about going to hatsumoude on the noon of the second. Speaking of which, the postal services are probably on break, too, so the New Year's cards wouldn't be sent out today.

The bus routes that were so clogged with traffic during work days only had a few household cars passing by, and even those cars were sparse, so the streets were quiet. Even the air felt like it was trying to vanish.

Only I was waiting at the bus stop.

I looked right, at the direction the bus was supposed to come from. Nothing.

I lowered the shoulder-bag that hung over my right shoulder on the bench, and then sat down. The timetable for New Year's was a sheet of dyer paper pasted over the usual plastic timetable, but I didn't bother looking at it. This bus route went between JR Station and the private railway tracks, and because it went through a number of big crossings and picked up and dropped off people from schools, apartments and hospitals, it rarely matched up with the schedules.

(I wonder if father and mother have gotten to Yamanashi by now.)

I cradled the box of pastry on my thighs. Last night, mother went out and bought it. Because I was intruding in on someone else's property. So she

bought three boxes of the same pastry, giving one to me and one to Yuuki, and then departed. These days, the number of department stores open on New Year's Day had increased.

Yuuki departed one step ahead and was lightly packed. I think all he took was a paper bag with the box of pastry. Men have it easy.

(Oh yeah, Yuuki said he was staying at Kobayashi-kun's house?)

He's a lively, nice kid. Well, we're the same age, but I nodded approvingly, in nee-san mode, and that reminded me of the New Year's card, the one with the familiar name.

However.

(Huh...?)

Because it was after a night's sleep, I couldn't remember anything about the name, much less what kanji it may have been made up with.

(Hmm. I guess I'll start from "A.")

Aikawa, Aizawa, Aida. ... Oh jeez this'll take forever.

Just as I thought it probably wouldn't have started with an A, the bus came. Fitting the New Year's mood, it had a Japanese flag plate on its front end.

It was more crowded than I expected, but lots of people got off at that stop, so I was able to find a seat.

(Iida, Ikeuchi, Itakura-)

The roads were empty, so the bus went smoothly, like a monorail at an amusement park.

(Ueki, Usami, Uchida, Umezu-)

The temple you could see from the bus was surrounded by paper shides hanging from stretched-out, thin ropes, and you could even see the temple

festival carts.

The temple you passed by when riding on the circulation bus that left M Station and went to Lillian Girls' Academy, I wondered if that one was also like this on New Year's. Temples dressed up on New Year's quite a bit, so it was a bit like Maria-sama being dressed up during the Maria festival.

(Etou, Enatsu, Enoki, Endou-)

While I did that, the bus reached the north exit of M Station. It usually took twenty minutes, but it only took at most half that today, so it was shocking. When I got off the bus and looked around, I noticed there were still a lot of people wearing kimono, because it was still the first three days of the new year.

(Oikawa, Ooki, Okano...)

-Ogasawara.

My heart skipped. Maybe I could see her today, I thought, and even my legs trembled with excitement at the thought, as I tried to climb the stairs. (O is Ogasawara's O.)

-Ogasawara. Ogasawara Sachiko.

It'd been a quick three months since we'd performed the sœur ritual. Yet, I still didn't feel "calm" around Sachiko-sama. Having my sailor scarf tied had become more of a daily ritual, so I was getting used to that. But Sachiko-sama would always do the unexpected, and that would subsequently leave me scrambling to figure out how to respond.

Walking while holding my hand, untying one of the ribbons in my hair.

Sachiko-sama might not realize how I become petrified when she does something like that.

There were many people in front of the convenience store I was told to wait at, but no one I recognized.

(Did I arrive too early?)

There were more than twenty minutes left until the time I was told. Because someone else might come, in the meantime, I stood in front of the convenience store instead of waiting inside. I wanted to see someone I recognize quickly. I wanted to welcome everyone.

(Okuyaam, Osada, Oda, Onizuka.)





I was bored, so I resumed the name-finding quiz.

(-Onda.)

But my memory wasn't even slightly stirred. It probably was from the A-line. Just as I was about to start down the K's, the automatic door behind me whizzed open. I tried to instinctively turn around, but the person who came out of the convenience store was way too fast, as that person embraced me.

“Gyauh!”

“... You sound like the child of a monster.”

Sounding exasperated, the “degenerate” loosed her arms that had been wrapped around me from behind.

“After all, you are a Lillian student, so you should at least tone that down to ‘Kya.’”

She didn't even need to look. That voice, and the feel of those arms.

“Rosa Gigantea-!”

When I spun around and knocked Rosa Gigantea's arms off, I felt like jumping, so elated I was to see her. It'd just been a week, but it felt so nostalgic.

“Alright! Happy New Year's!”

Rosa Gigantea opened a bag of candy mix, which screamed “I was just bought at this convenience store,” with its logo'd tape, then reached in, grabbed a handful and stuffed it into my pocket.

“Ah, gochisousama.”

I bowed.

“Eat it whenever you feel like it.”

“But how about everyone else’s share?”

A handful of candy might have been over half of the bag.

“Oh don’t worry about it, I bought it for Yumi, the sweets-lover.”

Rosa Gigantea unwrapped a maccha candy, tossed it into her mouth, and then rolled up the considerably emptied bag and smartly stuffed it into her own pocket. I wondered if she’d bought the candy, and then didn’t feel like holding onto it, leading to the sharing. After all, she only had a small handbag, so there was nowhere for her to put it.

“What-?”

Rosa Gigantea glared back lightly, like she was scolding me, for my ill-mannered stare at her.

“Ah, sorry, it’s the first time I’ve seen Rosa Gigantea in casual clothes, so it feels like it’s something really fresh.”

“Mmm.”

Maybe she took care of the hair ends today, because her features looked especially sharp. She wore dark brown boots to go with her caramel-colored long coat. And she casually wrapped a condensed-milk-like white muffler, resulting in her looking really like an adult... or maybe more like a gentleman from outside the country. It was cool.

“Yumi-chan, you look cute, your navy duffle coat suits you well.”

“Eh, oh, hardly, I’m nothing compared to Rosa Gigantea’s expensive coat.”

What was I hurriedly returning a compliment for? And who uses such a cheap term like “expensive” in such a situation, anyways? -As I depressed myself, I flicked my own forehead. In this sort of situation, Sachiko-sama would just smile and say, “Thank you.”

But this was Rosa Gigantea. “Yup, it was expensive. It’s cashmere. Last year, no, maybe the year before that, I begged my parents to buy it for me.

A combined Christmas and birthday present. And maybe my New Year's gift, too."

Rosa Gigantea was just as cheap. I felt like I was with an associate.

"But, dang, Yumi-chan's bag is stuffed. Do you have your pajama and change of clothes in there?"

She sniffed. Gosh, she's totally like a perverted old man.

"... Yes, I do."

Plus, my bath towel, my tooth brushing set, and other things like that. Personally, I thought Rosa Gigantea's setup was the bigger question. Because we were sleeping over, and not at a hotel, but at a home, right?

"But you came early, Rosa Gigantea, you came by train, right?"

I asked, while distancing my bag from Rosa Gigantea.

"Nope, I came by vroom vroom."

(...)

Vroom vroom, would be the kindergartener's way of saying "car." Gosh, an old man, or a baby, Rosa Gigantea really needed to pick.

"But there's no bus from M Station to Rosa Gigantea's house, right? Wow, you got driven by your parents? How wonderful."

"What, Yumi-chan, you want to ride a car?"

(... No, that's not it...)

I think Rosa Gigantea's wrong, here. But if I were to try to correct her, I'd end up confused, so I decided against it.

Sa.

Sa is Satou's as.

Satou Sei. –Also known as Rosa Gigantea.

“Okay, let's get going, then.”

When I reached into my pocket for a peach-yogurt flavored candy, Rosa Gigantea said that, despite it being before the meeting time.

“Eh, what, but...”

I was about to ask about the other people, but she dragged me to the north gate.

“Did I ever say anyone else was coming?”

“Huh?”

“All I said was, let's go on a date.”

“Eh!?”

“Fufufu. Gotcha, Yumi-chan.”

Rosa Gigantea made a slurping sound and terrified me.

“B, but, didn't you say lodging...?”

I asked, frightened.

“One stick is still called a carrot. Two people is still lodging.”

(Eek...)

“G, good bye.”

I turned around.

“Oh dear. Do you think I'd actually let go of prey that easily?”

Rosa Gigantea grinned, as she dragged me back.

“Yumi-chan, you’re sooooo cuuuuuuute. There there, let’s go somewhere nice, with onee-san.’

“Please have mercy!”

Usually this would be when Sachiko-sama showed up. ... However.

“Searching for Sachiko is futile. She’s at home right nooow.”

“Then, seriously?”

“Yumi-chan is all mine. How shall I cook you tonight?”

“Stoooooop.”

I squirmed, as Rosa Gigantea whispered into my ear, and she responded by hugging me like a doll.

“Hey! Didn’t Sachiko teach you? When you act like that, it just serves to please me.”

(... She might seriously be sadistic, Rosa Gigantea.)

And I’m masochistic because I enjoyed being scolded by Sachiko-sama, so we were a perfect fit. –Wait, what am I thinking?

“-Anyways, leaving sexual harassment at this....”

After touching me all over on her own accord, Rosa Gigantea either became satisfied or got bored, let go completely, like there was some sort of time trigger.

“Let’s get going.”

(...)

I feel like I heard her say that just a moment ago. I hope this person doesn't intend to repeat every action since then.

“Come on, let's go.”

Rosa Gigantea went down the steps, first.

(...)

“Yumi-chan, hurry up.”

(Ahhh!)

That's when I realized. The time between the first “let's get going” and the second “let's get going,” Rosa Gigantea intended to act innocently, like nothing ever happened.

“Rosa Gigantea, you're sneaky!”

I caught up to Rosa Gigantea and lightly whacked her arm. The candy was swaying in my pocket.

I won't be deceived by this!

Part 2.

Rosa Gigantea, under the guide of a “date,” took me to the temple by the school.

“Wow, Rosa Gigantea! Are you an ESPer!?”

“What are you saying?” We got off of the circulation bus and walked under the shrine archway. As I expected, festival carts lined up either side of the shrine pathway. The burning smell of soy sauce drifted in the air.

“Squid? Or corn?”

“We can do that later, let’s go pull our fortunes.”

Rosa Gigantea was very far from being able to be called deeply religious, so it was surprising, until I realized at least part of her reasoning was for “checking out the goods.” Because she went in line for the prettiest shrine maiden, despite it being the longest line.

“So we really did go on a two-person date.”

I mumbled, as we lined up for the fortunes. For a moment I still had a sliver of hope that Yoshino-san and Rei-sama would be waiting for us here.

Shi.

Shimazu Yoshino.

“Yoshino-chan and Rei are in Hakone for New Year’s.”

“Hakone?”

“With their families. It was Yoshino-chan’s wish, because she’s healthy.”

“Hakone?”

It was odd. Hakone was famous for hot springs, but wasn’t it known more as a tourist spot for the elderly, than high-school girls?

“Umm, are you sure you don’t mean Karuizawa?”

“Do they do horseracing in Karuizawa?”

“_”

I’d forgotten. Yoshino-san loved sports. So Shimazu and Hasekura went to Hakone to let Yoshino-san see a horse race live. It seemed like Yoshino-san’s go-go-go personality was a result of her environment. Not just Rei-sama, but their parents were also soft on Yoshino-san.

“Rosa Chinensis is studying during the break. And Rosa Foetida is at her villa in Hawaii. She goes every year.”

“And Shimako-san?”

“Shimako?”

Rosa Gigantea thought about it, and then raised an eyebrow and she answered.

“Shimako.”

To.

Toudou Shimako. “I didn’t invite her.”

“Why?”

“Lots of reasons. Shimako’s household gets a lot of visitors, so on New Year’s and the likes, she has to help out a lot. And plus, do you think that devout Christian Shimako would come to a hatsumoude at a shrine? You shouldn’t try to sway her beliefs like that.”

“Um, Rosa Gigantea? ... If you’re going to say that...”

“Yup. Once we go there, it’s over. You shouldn’t be inviting any Lillian student to a hatsumoude.”

Rosa Gigantea cackled.

“Then, why me?”

After all, I’m an actual student at Lillian Girls’ Academy, you know. Plus, though not really something to brag about, I was raised in the greenhouse since kindergarten.

“Your smell.”

Rosa Gigantea sniffed, as she crept closer.

“Yumi-chan, your household covers the million gods, Buddha, and Maria-sama, all together, friendly-like, right?”

“Eh, how!?”

What kind of smell is that? I ended up sniffing around my coat, but Rosa Gigantea, even though she said it first, doubled over in laughter.

“You’re really funny. Did you think you had the smell of sacred wine, incense, and holy bread and wine or something? Smell was a metaphor. A metaphor, understand?”

“Erk.”

“-Which of course means Yumi-chan’s house is a mixture, after all.”

“Yes.”

Indeed.

We had no prayer shelf, but we had shrine charms pasted around the house.

We had no Buddhist altar, but Yuuki’s room, as a Hanadera student, was filled with Buddhist goods. And the Lillian Girls’ Academy I attend is a Catholic school.

And my household accepted it all, without a second thought.

“Come to think of it, how unchaste.”

“Oh don’t fret, my house is the same. So I can tell if someone’s a comrade by their smell. Plus, that’s Japanese culture. And this is how the Yamayurikai members are, so don’t worry. If they didn’t have plans, I’m sure Yoshino-chan and Rei would have joined us.”

“But Shimako-san is different?”

“Shimako is special.”

She seemed to have reminisced about Shimako-san, as she softly narrowed her eyes.

Oh, Rosa Gigantea. You always seem to leave her alone, but you care so deeply about Shimako-san. Well, she is your proud sister, after all.

“Hey, Rosa Gigantea.”

I’m finally trying to get a better opinion of you, so stop checking out the shrine maidens like that.

It was finally their turn to get their fortunes, so I turned over a box with a single hole and rattled it. Then, when I looked to my side, Rosa Gigantea, who had lined up in front of me and thus was already long done, was holding the shrine maiden’s hand. –Gosh, you can never let your guard down with her.

“Slightly good luck.”

Rosa Gigantea said.

“Uncertain luck.”

I followed after.

We’d moved a bit away from where you receive the fortunes, and were standing near the plum trees, with beautiful blossoms of white fortunes sprouting along their branches. The real flowers, of course, were still some time away from blooming.

“It would have been more interesting if we got great luck and horrible luck, you know? Speaking of which, what’s better, slightly good luck or uncertain luck?”

“I think slightly good luck is just a hair better. ... Is there even horrible luck?”

“Well if there’s a great luck, I’m sure there is?”

But I’d never heard of a slightly bad luck or an uncertainly bad luck.

“You won’t lose anything, and your wishes will come true, despite some difficulty, or something? Gosh, how dicey.”

Rosa Gigantea folded up her fortune and tied it to a plum tree.

“Ah, hold on a second.”

The fortunes were written in an archaic-like way, so it was difficult to read. Rosa Gigantea’s ability to read them in a heartbeat was an exception. It seemed like she wasn’t just good at English.

“Lemme see.”

“Ah.”

Rosa Gigantea took the fortune from Yumi’s hands.

“Mmm. You might marry or move this year, it says. Also, you won’t have many children. Hmm, an influence of the declining birth rates.”

Moving aside, I think “marriage” and “children” are completely irrelevant to a sixteen-year old high-school girl.

“It says your wishes will come true as long as you work hard. Daily diligence, so to speak.”

Here, she said, as she handed the fortune back, so following in Rosa Gigantea’s footsteps, I folded it and tied it to a branch. Another fortune flower had blossomed.

Your wishes will come true as long as you work hard. But what am I wishing for the most?

I thought about it as I looked at the various charms, like the “arrow to ward away demons.”

Family stability. Good health. Warding off disaster. Safe birth prayer. Traffic safety.

People in this world have many things to pray to God for. And everyone lives with a myriad of worries.

The votive pictures were filled with “let me get into OO university.” With this many wishes, I wondered how God could possibly fulfill them all.

“Thanks for waiting.”

I was praying, so Rosa Gigantea left me behind to check out the festival carts, and now she returned, almost skipping with joy. Umm, she said it was a hatsumoude, but she wasn’t really visiting the temple, so what did she come here to do? I was getting the feeling she’d come just for the fortunes.

“Umm, Rosa Gigantea...? What’s that?”

My jaw dropped at seeing her carrying a vinyl bag in both hands.

“This bag has ikayaki and grilled corn. And this bag has okonomiyaki and takoyaki and yakisoba. I bought a lot, so they put it in bags for me.”

Apricot candy might be impossible, but we could carry cotton candy home, she said. Rosa Gigantea had designs to keep buying, so I felt a bit nauseous.

“Umm. What I’m asking isn’t what’s in the bags, but what you intend to do with so much food.”

“Of course, eating.”

“Wh, who?”

“Us. Alright, let’s start with takoyaki, Yumi-chan, that’s easy to eat.”

And Rosa Gigantea took out a pack of takoyaki from one of the bags. Wow. I only got a glimpse, but she bought three packs of each.





“Here, ahhh.”

Rosa Gigantea picked up a takoyaki and lifted it.

“Ahhh.”

How dreadful, I opened my mouth. But fresh-made takoyaki is warm and delicious. And the tako was big and juicy.

“Alright, let’s eat while it’s still hot. Oh, we’re in the way of passer-bys, so let’s go to the back. Yumi-chan, hold one bag.”

Just doing what I was told, I picked up the bag with takoyaki, okonomiyaki, and yakisoba in one hand, and carried a paper bag with a box of cakes in the other, and followed Rosa Gigantea to the back of the shrine, into the grove of mixed trees, using the trail. I was still carrying a big shoulder-bag, so I may have looked quite absurd. Some might even think I’ve run away from home.

Rosa Gigantea still had a hand open, so every now and then she’d feed me takoyaki, and so we ended up splitting a pack of eight four-four.

“What are you thinking, Rosa Gigantea?”

“What? Have you become anxious, because I’m leading you to a place with no people?”

“Not that.”

I stared at Rosa Gigantea, who was still playing around.

“You know as well as I do that the two of us aren’t going to be able to eat all this.”

“Hmm.”

Rosa Gigantea placed a rubberband around the emptied plastic pack, and carefully placed it back in the vinyl bag so it wouldn’t spill. All of a sudden

they'd come to a place where knee-high stone statues lined the path. This was leading out of the shrine area, it seemed. It was like a back road, and at the side of the small pavement, a number of cars were parked.

"Someone else is coming, right?"

"I don't know if I would answer right or wrong to that."

Rosa Gigantea grinned, and she fished around her pocket.

"Ah, I have candy here."

My hands were occupied, so I pointed my hip at her.

"No, no."

Rosa Gigantea took out a key of some sort. Of some sort? It was definitely not a house nor bicycle key. It was probably, not, it was definitely a car key.

"Umm-"

Without giving me time to gather myself, Rosa Gigantea kept walking, and when she got next to a yellow car, she used her key.

"Now now, come in."

She placed the bag with squid and corn in the backseat, got in, and reached over to open the passenger seat.

"Uhh, umm, Rosa Gigantea...?"

Where's the driver, I wanted to ask, but my luggage was taken, and then I myself was pushed into the car.

"Are you..."

And what I was afraid of happened. Rosa Gigantea got into the driver's seat. And she turned on the engine and put on her seat belt. Apparently, Rosa Gigantea had driven here herself, left her car behind the shrine

because the station parking spaces were filled, and gone to M Station to pick me up by bus.

“Don’t worry, I have a license.”

She showed me her card, and it was indeed just like my father’s one. The picture definitely belonged to Rosa Gigantea, and the name read “Satou Sei.” And she’d turned 18 on the 25th of the previous month, so she was of the right age to legally drive.

“It’s all good.”

Rosa Gigantea laughed, as she courteously fastened my seatbelt.

“Take offfff!”

“Ehhhhhhhh!?”

Ignoring my anxiety, the yellow car driven by Rosa Gigantea began moving. But then, the moment we got to the stoplight in front of the bus route, the engine stalled. I began trembling. In a way, it was scarier than a jet coaster or haunted house.

“How long have you been driving?”

I was very afraid of asking. But I didn’t have the confidence I could sit quietly without asking. I just noticed, but that “thing” stuck to the front glass. Isn’t that the “new driver” mark?

“How long?”

Turning on her left turn lights, Rosa Gigantea asked back. Uhh, wasn’t that light late?

“I am asking, how long you have been driving since you received your license.”

“How long? Today’s the first time I drove outside of the practice range.”

“Eek.”

“It’s all good, I was safely able to drive here from home.”

“It’ll be horrible if you get into an accident.”

I might have been shrieking. But this may be curtains to my life of sixteen years, so I think that’s a normal reaction.

“Hahahahahah.”

Gripping the steering wheel, Rosa Gigantea laughed, pleased.

“Le, let me off, please.”

“You won’t die. After all, both of our fortunes were for ‘good’ luck. Oops.”

“Kya!”

Even though she was a newbie, she attempted a clumsy passing. I don’t know where we’re going, but please, don’t hurry. Please don’t try anything, please, just get on a straightforward road.

“Oh, wonderful adulthood-!”

I started praying to Maria-sama.

“Hahahah. Yumi-chan, you’re funny.”

Screeeeech, screech screech screech!

“Gyaaa. Save me, Maria-sama!”

And thus, strapped to a car like it was a mental and physical torture chair, I completely forgot to ask a very crucial question, so overwhelmed with panic I was. –Or rather, there was no way I was going to compose myself enough to ask.

Where are we headed?

I think it would have been very nice to know.

With the archenemy

Part 1.

“We’re here.”

I don’t know what roads we’d taken, nor how we may have looked driving across them, but somehow we’d managed to reach our destination without getting in an accident. I don’t remember how many times I must have repeated prayers.

“And... it doesn’t look like heaven, yet.”

Gathering some composure, I looked outside the window. We were in an extremely quiet, green neighborhood. It wasn’t the quiet you’d describe the countryside with, like you would my home. The trees, which were grown with a clear esthetic sense, grew thick over the towering fences surrounding the site, as well as colored the peaceful promenade as roadside trees.

“Where are we?”

“Where we’re staying tonight.”

“You were serious?”

Rosa Gigantea was so carefree that I’d begun to doubt her words entirely.

“Of course I was serious. Hold on.”

Rosa Gigantea stepped out of the car and pressed the interphone button in front of her.

(Interphone?)

It was a house with an interphone placed conspicuously right on the gate, like you would expect any other house. But of course, I felt out of place. Not because of the interphone, but because the interphone belonged to a

house that was far, far larger than your regular house. Let's just say, it's larger than mine. By far.

Rosa Gigantea did say a friend's house, but I definitely didn't expect a house this large. I mean, I don't even know how large the house is, because I can't see the end of the fence from inside the car. I felt faint.

"And I'm back."

As Rosa Gigantea settled back into the driver's seat, the gate opened.

"Wow."

It was surprising enough that the gate opened by itself, but the intensity of the world that lay beyond it made me gulp.

"This isn't a school nor hospital, right?"

"Hahahah. I see."

After laughing, Rosa Gigantea pointed to the splendid nameplate that hung on the gate, as she slowly nudged the car forward.

I read it.

"Ogasawara."

(Eh?)

I re-read it, doubting my eyes.

Ogasawara.

The car slid through the gate. The afterimage of the plate was burnt into my mind.

"Umm, umm."

I became speechless, trying to say so many things at once. Opening and closing my mouth, not being able to make my vocal cords work, I clutched at Rosa Gigantea's arm, imploring her to stop.

"So, Yumi-chan, how do you feel?"

"Then, this is Sachiko-sama's-"

"Righto!"

"Rosa Gigantea, you liar! You never said we were going to Sachiko-sama's house!"

"Yes I did, I said we're going to a friend's house. And Sachiko's a friend, right? So I wasn't lying."

That's just a sophism! It was so obvious she'd been fudging over the fact so she could surprise me.

"But who cares. Yumi-chan, you wanted to see Sachiko, didn't you?"

"Of, of course, but, I mean..."

Then what, she asked, but I didn't know how to answer. But if she just drove me to Sachiko-sama like this, I don't know what I'd do. I wasn't in good condition, kind of.

"I haven't readied myself."

"Why? You see Sachiko every day at school, stop being so nervous. Relax, relax."

I wished she could lend me even a tenth of her composure. Rosa Gigantea ignored my petition and slowly moved the car along. It was like a forest after going through the gate, but there was a tube-like tunnel for the winding pathway through it.

"I mean, after all, it's not like we're going to Sachiko's parents and asking, 'May I have your daughter?' or something."

“P, parents!?”

I hadn’t even thought about that. Sachiko’s household meant, obviously, her parents would be in. What a rude “little sister” to be intruding on the second of the new year.

I wanted Rosa Gigantea to turn around, but it was too late for that. We’d already pushed ourselves into the house, the moment she used the interphone.

(Rosa Gigantea I hate you so much.)

When they finally finished passing through the forest, she found herself in the middle of an English-style garden, with a building that looked like a mansion, or maybe even more like a castle, in view.

“Umm, I think it was a right.”

Rosa Gigantea turned the wheel, and they saw something like a parking lot. Something like, because there were other cars, but otherwise you wouldn’t have been able to tell. As for why, that’s because it was spacious enough to easily fit twenty plus cars, but unlike the parking lot at a supermarket or something of the sort, it had a neat roof.

“I have a bad feeling.”

Rosa Gigantea muttered, as she saw a shiny, polished, red open-car in the lot.

“Bad feeling?”

“I can’t explain it, but that car gives me a really bad feeling.”

“Huh?”

“Umm, just think about what kind of guy that might belong to.”

Rosa Gigantea deliberately chose the furthest spot from that red car, and parked. Red and yellow. It would be like a stoplight if they had a green car.

When I looked at the other two cars parked in this space, I realized it was the parking lot for visitors, because there were no black cars.

“Alright, alright.”

I stepped out of the car and helped guide Rosa Gigantea’s parking, and imagined “what kind of guy that might belong to.” Someone that’s self-confident, conceited and narcissistic.

“Ahh!”

“What, what, Yumi-chan!?”

Rosa Gigantea, not used to parking, reacted to my voice, slamming the breaks and quickly sticking her head out of her window. She thought she was about to hit or scrape something.

“Oh, sorry, you’re still alright.”

“... Don’t scare me like that.”

She turned off the engine and tottered out of the car, holding a hand to her breast. Well, it looked like she was nervous about driving, after all. Plus, the car belonged to her mother, she said.

“Could it be... the prince?”

“Oh, that car? Yeah, I’m thinking the gingko kingdom prince.”

We retrieved the presents, our belongings, and the food we bought at the temple, and walked toward the building.

“Because it’s New Year’s. Because they’re cousins. Because they’re fiancées.”

I mumbled to myself. That it wasn’t surprising that he was at Sachiko-sama’s house.

“But Yumi-chan is boring.”

“Ah...”

But in my case, I don't know if boring or interesting were a good way to describe me.

“Maybe that's why I was called.”

As always, Rosa Gigantea abbreviated her sentences, so I needed someone to translate for me.

“Who called you?”

“Sachiko.”

Of course, was Rosa Gigantea's facial expression. Maybe she knew everything, but I'd finally begun to understand what was going on. And even then, just roughly.

“So, Sachiko-sama called you?”

“Of course, what did you think?”

“That Rosa Gigantea was invading.”

When I answered truthfully, Rosa Gigantea flicked my forehead, “How rude.”

“She asked about my New Year's plans, and then said, ‘Then would you like to come over to play?’ She specifically singled out this date, Sachiko.”

So Rosa Gigantea seriously tried to gather the three Rose families for a hatsumoude, but Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida turned her down for prior arrangements (not that she was surprised, because she came up with the idea the afternoon before New Year's Day), and right when she gave up hope, Sachiko-sama called her with the pleasant invitation, so she took me along.

“But that would mean I wasn't called.”

“Why? When I mentioned your name, she said, ‘Bring her, please.’”

“Really!?”

Rosa Gigantea’s words made me ecstatic.

“You know, both of you are so unlike one another, but for some reason you both are so passive. If you’re both ‘waiting’ for the other to act, a hundred years’ll pass before anything happens.”

Right when Rosa Gigantea made her happy, she immediately dropped the floor out from under her feet. A hundred years’ll pass- what a harsh way to put it.

“Speaking of which, what was the ginkgo prince’s name?”

Had Rosa Gigantea tried to eradicate his existence from her mind? The ginkgo prince’s name.

“Umm-”

But I couldn’t remember.

I remembered his name wasn’t Ogasawara, despite being her cousin. But it sounded like it came from the Tale of the Genji.

Ahh, I couldn’t remember peoples’ names lately. Should I start all over again from A?

“Oh, whatever, who cares about him.”

Rosa Gigantea stood in front of the big, entrance-like door, and yanked on the chain dangling in front of her, ringing the doorbell.

It looked awesome. The building itself was very antique. I imagined a white-haired gentleman coming out, in a crisp, black suit, like in those western-style movies. Like a butler.

After a moment, I heard the lock being opened from inside. Unlike the gate, this one was manual.

“Satou-sama? Please come in.”

The door was opened. But the person that answered the door wasn't a butler, as I'd imagined. Well, they were both men, I suppose, but he wasn't wearing a suit, nor did he have white hair. In fact, I recognized him. “Huh?”

“Huh?”

We both spoke up. Not Rosa Gigantea and I, but the person who opened the door and I.

We looked at each other with a surprised face, like we were wondering if there was a mirror in front of us. Because the person on the other side of the door “wasn't supposed to be there.”





“Yuuki...?”

“Yumi...?”

I tried to get an answer from Rosa Gigantea. But it wasn't a continuation of her bag of tricks. Rosa Gigantea was also looking at us siblings, with amusement.

“What's going on?”

A tall man crept up from the hallway behind Yuuki.

“Yo, welcome.”

When I saw him, the fog cleared from my brain.

(It was “ka”!)

The person who wrote Yuuki a New Year's card, the name I thought looked familiar. It was the tall man standing in front of me. –Ka, I remembered I skipped past it, for some reason.

Ka, for Kashiwagi.

Kashiwagi. Kashiwagi Suguru.

Rosa Gigantea and I both thought it was certainly not amusing that he was here, standing in front of us. The ginkgo prince, Kashiwagi Suguru. As always, he wore an invigorating smile on his face, and had the look of, “I belong here.”

-And he rested a hand on my brother's shoulder.

Part 2.

“Oh, welcome, Rosa Gigantea, Yumi.”

About ten seconds after Kashiwagi-san’s appearance, Sachiko-sama showed up at the foyer in a kimono.

“Happy New Year’s, onee-sama. Thank you for inviting me today.”

I hurriedly took off my coat and gave my New Year’s greeting. But the paper bag with candy, the vinyl bag with okonimiyaki and stuff, and my shoulder bag got in the way, so it was very imperfect.

“Happy New Year’s.”

For the first time this year, Sachiko-sama gave me a flowery smile.

A like, peach-colored kimono with small, yellow flower embroidery (they’re called fine patterns, I found out later). And on top of that, a grape-tea colored haori with butterfly patterns. It was even more brilliant than the clothing she wore for the Japanese paintings exhibit some time ago, but she wore it like it was her every-day clothing, and that made it look even better. She’d gathered her straight, black hair with one ornamental hairpin, ending up with a relatively casual hairstyle. She didn’t have any make-up, but she still looked absolutely captivating.

Sachiko-sama said, “Please,” and led us down the hallway.

Oh, how I wanted to brag, to anyone, really.

Look at how lovely my onee-sama looks. I wanted to run around bragging. –But this wasn’t the time to be thinking things like that.

“Why’re you here?”

I grabbed Yuuki’s sleeve, as we walked, and asked. As his elder sister, and as Sachiko-sama’s little sister, I had to ask him.

“What do you mean, why?”

Yuuki asked back.

“Why is this Yuuki’s ‘friend’s house’?”

“I don’t know, either. It just ended up like this. I mean, I really intended to sleep over at Kobayashi’s house, but Kashiwagi-senpai kidnapped me in the middle.”

Apparently, Kobayashi-kun and Kashiwagi-san had played a game at the arcade over Yuuki, and Kobayashi-kun lost. But why did they have to bet Yuuki?”

“Really?”

And how’s he related to Kashiwagi-san, Yumi thought, as she looked at Kashiwagi-san standing naturally next to Yuuki, but then they met eyes, and he smiled.

“Fukuzawa is a pretty common name, so I had no idea, that Yumi-chan was Yukichi’s big sis.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call her ‘Yumi-chan’ in such an intimate way, Kashiwagi-san.”

Rosa Gigantea cautioned Kashiwagi-san.

“Oh, Rosa Gigantea, I’m not sure you can talk. Because she’s Sacchan’s sister, isn’t she? Sacchan’s sister is like my sister.”

“I don’t like that ‘Sacchan’ either.”

“I can’t help it. I’ve called her Sacchan ever since she was born.”

Rosa Gigantea, and her previously mentioned “same species” person, blasted invisible fireworks at each other as they walked down the hallway. And to the side of that, I kept interrogating Yuuki.

“You’re called ‘Yukichi’ at school?”

“... Please don’t ask.”

It sounded like my brother had his own set of troubles at school.

“Welcome. I’m glad we have more visitors.”

At first glance, the lady looked like she might be Sachiko-sama’s mother, as she stood up from the living-room seat and greeted us.

“Happy New Year’s. Long time no see, aunt Sayako.”

“Oh my, Sei-san, have you been well?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Rosa Gigantea had switched completely into “speaking to adults” mode. But this didn’t feel like she was putting on a good face, as she definitely seemed to think well of Sachiko-sama’s mother.

“Mother, I’d like to introduce you to my sister, Fukuzawa Yumi.”

“P, pleasure to make your acquaintance, thank you for inviting me today...”

“Oh, how cute. Sachiko-san, you have a good eye.”

On top of the nightingale-colored, floral fine pattern, she wore a deep crimson haori, and this was brilliant to look at, too. But it was definitely not flamboyant, instead looking extremely refined, and maybe it was because of something that ran in their family’s blood.

“Do call me Sayako, and I shall call you Yumi-chan, okay?”

“Yes.”

And of course, Rosa Gigantea didn’t raise a complaint this time. Come to think of it, I didn’t really like Kashiwagi-san called me “-chan” either. But Sachiko-sama’s mother was perfectly okay.

“Okay, Yumi-chan. The second is a vacation day for the Ogasawara household, every year. None of our housekeepers are here, so there’s not a whole lot we can do for you, but in turn, most of the worrisome men are not home, either, so make yourself home.”

“How cruel, aunt. You make it sound like I’m a bother. I worried everyone may be feeling lonesome, so I even brought a kouhai to help be the bodyguards.”

Kashiwagi-san said, as he brought tea.

“Oh, I’m sorry. But Suguru-san is a different story. Men that will pour tea for us are perfectly welcome.”

“I am grateful.”

Laughing, satisfied, Kashiwagi-san placed tea cups filled with Japanese tea before each person. Sachiko-sama placed the pastry that Yuuki and I had brought, although at different timings, on a pastry tray and placed it before us, saying, “Thank you very much.”

I was Rosa Gigantea’s assistant, microwaving the takoyaki and okonomiyaki and toumorokoshi and everything else we’d bought at the temple. The kitchen in Sachiko-sama’s house was extremely big, and there was even a big oven range for heavy-duty use, but no one knew how to operate it, so we just used the family-use electric microwave to heat everything bit by bit.

“What a rare occasion.”

Aunt Sayako said, as she happily ate the temple food. For the wife of the Ogasawara household, this sort of food wasn’t something she could see very often. Maybe Rosa Gigantea bought all of this knowing that fact. If so, she was definitely formidable.

(But, what is this?)

Am I the only one finding it odd that this lineup of people ate temple food together while sipping tea?

The clock had just passed four in the afternoon.

Part 3.

So, without really figuring out what was going on, we began playing a poem card game, and I was swept along with the momentums, so without realizing it, I actually began playing around with Sachiko-sama's mortal enemy, Kashiwagi-san.

We'd moved places to the Japanese-style room, which is where we ended up playing. The scent of the freshly-laid tatami tickled my nostrils, and the room was decorated with a lavish India-ink hanging scroll and a shouchikubai flower arrangement. This room was designed so that if you removed the sliding doors, it could become twice or even three times as spacious.

The results of the match were, of course, the complete defeat of the Fukuzawa siblings, who weren't used to playing such a refined game. In contrast, the Ogasawara relatives had years of experience, so there was simply too much of a difference in skill. That said, even though it was obvious how things would turn out, losing was vexing.

"Okay, how about diving up into teams and playing cards?"

Kashiwagi-san suggested.

Rosa Gigantea, who'd lost to Kashiwagi-san by one point, agreed vigorously. She seemed to be looking at it as a chance to take revenge.

"Sure, but how should we split teams?"

“If we do the Fukuzawa siblings, then the Ogasawara family, that would leave Rosa Gigantea and I-”

“What-!?”

Yuuki and I, as well as Rosa Gigantea all raised a complaining voice. Of course. Turning it into a team match was theoretically supposed to be to even things up, so sticking the inexperienced Fukuzawa siblings together was absurd.

That said, Rosa Gigantea was complaining for a different reason. They had bad blood between them, so the two of them teaming up wouldn't end too well.

“If half object, I guess that idea's been rejected.”

He probably said it just to say it. Because he backed down quickly.

I glanced at Sachiko-sama, who was putting away the poem card game. She looked like she didn't really care who she was paired with. Aunt Sayako, to her right, looked the same. They're so mature.

I mean, I'm not saying it aloud, but I wouldn't like it if Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san were paired. And like Rosa Gigantea, I would prefer if I wasn't paired with him, either. But if everyone said something that selfish, we wouldn't get anywhere.

“Auntie and I, Sachiko and Yumi-chan, and the two men?”

-Suggested Rosa Gigantea. Kashiwagi-san seemed to be pleased by the suggestion, too.

“What a wonderful arrangement. Yukichi, come here.”

Kashiwagi-san slid to the side, opening the space next to him. He seemed to be in very good humor.

(...?)

I knew Kashiwagi-san was a homosexual, but was he really that fond of placing the raccoon-faced Yuuki next to him? I mean, I'm not a male homosexual, so I can't really say much about it. Speaking of which, Yuuki was the one being rather indecisive.

“Onee-sama, shall I come over?”

“Please.”

I settled down where Yuuki used to be. Rosa Gigantea slid over, and with that, every pair was able to sit next to each other.

“What first?”

Rosa Gigantea shuffled the plastic cards with blinding speed.

“Shall we start with babanuki[\[9\]](#)?”

Aunt Sayako giggled.

“Yumi, you're in charge of taking the card from the neighbor.”

“Ah.”

“Okay? Be insentient as you do it, and then hand it to me. I'll manage our cards.”

Sachiko-sama whispered in my ear, at the start.

“Oh, battle plans? How friendly.”

Rosa Gigantea laughed, teasing, but I didn't understand that “battle plan.” Because babanuki was luck-based, wasn't it? It's a simple game where you discard pairs while taking and giving cards?

But I realized it wasn't so simple. It was usually an individual game, so that left one person on each team free to perform a task. Thus, the game hinged on how that free person was used.

(What... what?)

Right after everyone spread out their cards in a fan, Kashiwagi-san just stared at me. We were going clockwise, so sitting to our left, they would take cards from Sachiko-sama.

Wondering why he was doing that, I took a card from aunt Sayako's fan.

(Insentient, insentient.)

However. I glanced at the card as I handed it to Sachiko-sama, and I reflexively went, "Erk!"

(J, Joker...)

The Joker is the "baba." How unfortunate to draw the Joker in the first turn. Then, Kashiwagi-san's eyes glimmered.

"Yumi-chan, you just drew 'baba' didn't you."

"Ah."

When I shouted, Yuuki and Rosa Gigantea, whom were supposed to be enemies, both said, "Idiot." And Sachiko-sama, to my side, sighed.

Of course, my reaction at drawing the joker was bad enough, but then my reaction to his question was even worse. It was like saying, "Yes, we have the Joker."

"So that's what you meant by insentient."

Sachiko-sama said, "Don't worry, we just started," and placed a reassuring hand on my depressed shoulders.

I learnt a lesson. You couldn't underestimate "babanuki." It's a poker-like adult's game.

Afterward, I pulled cards while singing "Maria-sama's soul" in my mind. As a result of it, the game continued without a hitch, and we were able to

finish first. Maria-sama may have lent her strength to us.

But when it came to intellectual games like shichinarabe[\[10\]](#) and doubt, Kashiwagi-san and Rosa Gigantea showed immense skill.

“Yumi-chan, keep this in mind. Men that are good at shichinarabe are men you want to avoid at all costs.”

“If I may interject, ladies that are great at doubt are like they’re admitting they’re great liars, are they not?”

And so they argued. Rosa Gigantea and Kashiwagi-san were like archenemies. They were similar, and yet very contradictory.

“Shall we take a break?”

Aunt Sayako said, and their circle crumbled. They looked like they were relaxed, but everyone was pretty focused.

After the poetry card game, babanuki, shichinarabe, doubt, scum, rummy, concentration, page one, and then ladders, so it was already past eight. Time flies when you’re having fun. I looked at the score we kept on a notepad and was surprised we’d played so much.

“Where could I wash my hands?”

I stood up.

“Oh, I’ll lead you.”

Rosa Gigantea went with me. She knew her way around another person’s house. She took my hand and lead me down the halls.

“Rosa Gigantea, have you been here before?”

She seemed to know Sachiko-sama’s mother, too.

“Indeed. This year, no, I guess it’s more like last summer, I came over. Rosa Chinensis was with me, of course.”

“Mmm.”

“Jealous?”

Rosa Gigantea stopped and pinched my cheeks. I’m not being sullen!

“It was before I became her sister.”

It would be illogical to be jealous, I thought. I mean, of course. That said, I also felt it was natural that I’d be a bit envious when listening to stories about onee-sama before I came to know her. So in the end, I probably was being sullen.

“Righto, youths with bright futures shouldn’t be bothered by the past.”

Rosa Gigantea opened the brown door in front of her. That seemed to be the washroom. It seemed like it wasn’t designed just for one person, so Rosa Gigantea came in, too.

A rich person’s house seemed to be on a different scale from a regular house in every way. It was like a miniature version of the washroom at the high-class hotel I went to, when my cousin married last month. The floor used a fluffy carpet material, there were powder room corners separate from the washing counter, and hand towels were neatly folded in a cute basket, imploring you to use them. The lighting utensils were shaped like flowers, and it was just lovely.

There were three individual rooms. And each bathroom was around twice as large as the western-style toilets. Apparently this was the visitors’ restroom, and there were other, employee-use restrooms and family-use restrooms fitted around the house. Sachiko-sama’s room came with a bathroom and toilet, so this house was definitely like a hotel.

“After we graduate, you should just come over to visit every now and then.”

When I was washing my hands, Rosa Gigantea began speaking to my reflection on the mirror.

“What?”

“Probably when her uncles and father aren’t home, like today.”

“I don’t follow?”

When I asked, she said, “Wait a second,” washed her hands, and dried her hands using the dry parts of the hand towel I used, before turning to me.

“Today, the Ogasawara men are with their other women.”

“Eh!?”

“I told you about this before, didn’t I? The men in this household are unique, they have other houses. On New Year’s Day they have an exquisite party with their main household, right? And then on the second and third, they call it a vacation and let their housekeepers go home. And then the men go to the number twos. Actually maybe it’s the other way around. Because the men aren’t home, the housekeepers can take a break. Not that it matters.”

“Then, the third is with their number threes, and the fourth is...”

I wasn’t really trying to joke, but Rosa Gigantea laughed, anyways.

“I don’t think I hear the term ‘number three’ used much. Anyways, I’m sure the men of this household have that many. Actually I hear they have a meal party with the executives from their company on the fourth, so they come home by then.”

“You’re pretty knowledgeable.”

“Jealous?”

“... A bit.”

When I grumbled, Rosa Gigantea grinned.

“People have their roles. She can’t really show her weaknesses to you, because you’re her little sister, you know? Likewise, I don’t show any weaknesses to Sachiko, either.”

“Then, why?”

“Sachiko’s onee-sama is my friend.”

“Rosa Chinensis...!”

Of course, Sachiko-sama was like Rosa Gigantea’s little sister. Then she would talk to Rosa Gigantea whenever she was in a bind-

“Right, she told me. And Sachiko knows about that, so it’s alright.”

“Ah.”

“In the end, it just means Rosa Chinensis trusts me. And by doing so, she’s able to use me. And as a result, I’m just doing as she wants me to do.”

“Umm.”

Now she was losing me.

“In other words, the goal was to bring Yumi-chan and brighten the place. It’s lonesome to sit here alone with her mother, while the men are off with other women. So we come in, brighten the place, and make everyone happy.”

“Ah... oh, I get it.”

So I don’t need to wonder about any ulterior motives for buying temple food, eating them here, sipping tea, and playing card games all day.

“There was an unexpected person, but hey, everything’s worked out, so who cares.”

“I’m sorry.”

Yuuki was probably the unexpected person. Of course, Kashiwagi-san was the one who brought him, but as his elder sister, I ended up feeling a bit responsible.

“No, Kashiwagi probably thought the same thing when he brought him.”

“Brightening the day?”

“Yup. And Yumi-chan’s brother is just like you, fitting in well and all. As expected of cousins, I guess? He knew what kind of person Sachiko-sama might be comfortable with.”

“Ah.”

I got a slightly better opinion of him, but I think I’ll never be able to like Kashiwagi-san. Rosa Gigantea opened the door to the hallway and crinkled her nose as she grinned.

Part 4.

When we returned to the Japanese-style room, no one was there, so when we wandered around trying to find everyone, we found aunt Sayako in the living room we first sat down in.

“Oh, you two, would you like sushi?”

Aunt Sayako had been going to and fro, but she decided to wait at the living room to tell us where everyone had gone.

“Umm.”

The two of them simply nodded, not knowing whether they were asked if they liked sushi or if they were hungry. Of course, they liked sushi, but they’d been munching on pastries while playing cards, so they weren’t particularly hungry. Rosa Gigantea seemed to feel the same.

“Mother, just how many did you order?”

Sachiko-sama came from the foyer carrying three varnished wooden boxes. And aunt Sayako placed an index finger to her jaw as she looked up and thought.

“Umm... eight, I think.”

Sachiko-sama raised an eyebrow.

“Do you remember how many people are here? There are only six.”

Of course, I thought. I silently supported Sachiko-sama. There are only six, so what kind of calculation ends up with eight?

“But, I thought young men eat a lot.”

“But we were grabbing snacks, so I don’t think anyone is that hungry?”

“I didn’t think that deeply about it. Gosh, Sachiko-san, you don’t have to be so harsh.”

Feigning cross-ness, aunt Sayako rolled her eyes at Sachiko-sama.

(... Cute.)

It might be rude saying this about an older woman, but aunt Sayako was so cute you’d want to hug her. Soft, gentle, and refined. Someone you might want to just sit in a room, like an ohina-sama, and watch. They looked so similar, being mother and daughter, but she was so different from Sachiko-sama. Oh, but Sachiko-sama sulks in front of Rosa Chinensis, too.

“More importantly, Sachiko-san, do you know where the tea cups and tea caddies are?”

“Suguru-san poured tea a moment ago, did he not?”

“I’m asking because I can’t find Suguru-san. All the housekeepers being away is a little inconvenient.”

She seemed to truly mean it, and I thought, wow, that's not really the kind of sentence a regular person would utter. Ever.

(She might be even more of a princess than Sachiko-sama.)

Born into good lineage, married into a plutocratic family, and surrounded by servants, I suppose if you're a wife of a house like this, you would never once pour tea for yourself.

"Though I do know where the teapot is. Oh, Sachiko-san, can you put the tea leaves into the teapot? But I couldn't find the tea caddies, either. Oh, but we received tea as a New Year's gift, where did we put them?"

"..." As I thought, aunt Sayako-sama had not poured tea for herself in years.

"Aunt Sayako, I'll pour the tea."

Noticing this, Rosa Gigantea stepped forward. Actually, I was just pondering whether I should tag along, too. Kashiwagi-san was pouring tea on top of the wagon, so the tea caddies were probably on the wagon. And we'd split up the dishes for washing before we began the poetry game, and washed them, so the tea cups were probably still in the drying machine.

"Then, Yumi, come help."

"Yes."

I carried the sushi with Sachiko-sama. Five varnished wooden boxes were stacked at the foyer. She really ordered eight boxes, aunt Sayako. But personally, it was the first time I'd seen sushi in square boxes, as opposed to sushi tubs.

When I began walking, carrying three, Sachiko-sama stopped me, "Wait," and then took one.

"Oh, onee-sama, I can carry three."

"Just wait."

She said, and she walked in front of me.

“Yumi.”

After five steps, Sachiko-sama suddenly stopped.

“Yes?”

So, I stopped, too.

“... Thank you.”

“Huh?”

I didn't know why I was being thanked, so I asked back with an oddly high-pitched voice. But onee-sama, as usual, just continued forth, having said what she wanted to say.

“Onee-samaaa.”

Onee-sama was carrying more sushi boxes than me, so why was I being thanked?

I stood for a moment, left behind in the dark hallway, and mumbled to myself.

“I don't understand.”

But, my heart felt like it was about to burst.

Even without understanding exactly what she meant, I still felt the feelings behind what onee-sama said to me as she stepped in front of me.

So, even if I may not have gotten everything, I still answered, “Yes,” and followed her.

By onee-sama's side

Part 1.

Adding Yuuki and Kashiwagi-san, who'd come back from the restroom, we settled down for sushi dinner. And I couldn't help but recoil slightly when I opened the lid to the box.

(Eek...)

I expected as much, based on the container, but it was completely different from the sushi I was accustomed to eating at home. Because rather than octopus, or sliced mackerel, or kappa rolls, it was all red snapper, or abalone, or urchin, or fat tuna, or sweet shrimp, and other such expensive foods. Really, there was egg, but it wasn't the egg sushi you normally think of, the one with the slab of egg placed on rice and bound with nori. No, it was actually the thickly-cooked egg, like the usual sushi, but it had no rice, and instead was sliced and placed at the edges, like decoration.

Even the squid, salmon roe, and young Japanese amberjack were made with high-quality fish. They were fresh and juicy so that even a complete newbie could tell.

(I feel like, if I eat this once, I won't be able to eat regular sushi ever again.)

I secretly sighed, and that coincidentally overlapped with Yuuki's sigh. –We were both from the same family, so we thought the same thing. We looked at each other and lowered our shoulders.

“Wow, how rich. Itadakimasu-”

Rosa Gigantea was undaunted. Seriously, what sort of lifestyle did she usually live?

“Yumi-chan, was sushi a bad idea?”

Noticing us siblings, who were staring at the sushi without lifting our chopsticks, aunt Sayako looked worried.

“No, no.”

“It’s my favorite.”

We answered, and Sachiko-sama gently said.

“You don’t need to force yourselves, you may not have an empty stomach, yet?”

But I felt like we had to eat, at least a bit. Because aunt Sayako was sorrowfully looking at her yet-unopened box.

“Nonsense, itadakimasu.”

Yuuki steeled himself and split his chopstick. The chopsticks were rounded, and only connected at the top.

“I’ll just think of it as the Ryuuguujou.”

The dancing of red snappers and flounders.

-Or rather, temporarily placing himself in a completely different world. Is what he meant, I think.

Well of course.

So, I split my chopsticks too. After all, think about it. I’d been surprised by almost everything since coming into this house, but there’s nothing you can do about their being at least an entire class higher. Sachiko-sama didn’t invite me so she could brag, so it was rude to be surprised at every turn. ... I felt bad.

So in a way, I thought it would be the better guest if I simply accepted things for how they were.

(Ahh, the red snapper is so delicious!)

As Sachiko-sama said, I wasn't that hungry, but it was so delicious that my chopstick kept saying, "One more."

(It's great, but I don't want to know how many calories I've eaten today. New Year's weight-gain is so bad... mm?)

And then I saw something unbelievable.

(Really?)

I thought I saw wrong, so I looked away. But it bothered me, so I looked again, and I realized it did happen.

(Wh, what are you doing, Kashiwagi-san...!)

He was picking up the urchin, salmon roe and abalone, among others, from Sachiko-sama's sushi box and placing them in his own.

(If he wanted more, there's another box...)

Stupid Kashiwagi, I fumed, mimicking Rosa Gigantea's speech mannerism. Even if they were cousins, it was mean taking sushi without asking, -I thought.

Sachiko-sama should just scold him, like Sachiko-sama does.

"Stop being caught up in the moment!" That was soothing.

But my telepathy never reached Sachiko-sama, who instead simply allowed him to carry on.

(Why-!?)

While chewing on sushi, I fumed. Even if I wanted Rosa Gigantea to notice, she was so absorbed in sushi she didn't seem to care. The tail of sweet shrimp was even sticking out of her mouth.

But.

After observing for a while, I began to realize it wasn't what I first thought. It wasn't that Sachiko-sama was simply having her sushi taken. Kashiwagi-san was placing his own flounder, squid and sweet shrimp to the empty places of Sachiko-sama's box. And Sachiko-sama was eating the sushi Kashiwagi-san was placing on her box without any questions.

When he noticed my stare, Kashiwagi-san smiled, full of composure, and winked.

(What!?)

Right as my head was about to switch into all-out panic-mode, Yuuki put egg in my sushi box.

"I'm taking your ginger."

"Right, go ahead."

I liked the sweet egg, and Yuuki liked the bitter ginger. So we always traded. Like father and Yuuki's kakipi. It was a family thing.

(... Oh!)

After another glance at Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san's sushi boxes, I felt an overwhelming sense of defeat. Kashiwagi-san's actions were simply that of a history of closeness. And so I felt envy over Kashiwagi-san's knowledge of Sachiko-sama's likes and dislikes, and a bit of indignation at Sachiko-sama's wordless acceptance of it.

(Didn't Sachiko-sama dislike men? Didn't Sachiko-sama hate Kashiwagi-san? Then why was she able to eat sushi that Kashiwagi-san had touched?)

So, afterward, the delicious sushi didn't taste so delicious anymore. –Even though Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki were both eating without any lamentation.

Onee-sama is such a curious existence.

With just a tiny gesture or behavior, she could toss her sister into the clouds, or drop her into a bottomless pit.

Part 2.

“Uhh, ummm. I know it’s an indecent request.”

It was just after eleven thirty at night when Yuuki prostrated himself in front of Rosa Gigantea and Sachiko-sama.

After our late dinner, we split up and cleaned the dishes, and has then split up into the Lillian and Hanadera groups.

This house had many guest rooms, but they were all semi-double or twin bedrooms, so even if we could fit two people into one, it wasn’t possible to crowd three, so aunt Sayako suggested we spread blankets in the Japanese-style room. It was like we were lodging, after all, so Sachiko-sama had to be with us.

We dragged three sets of blankets from the blanket room (!) to the Japanese-style room we played cards in, amused ourselves by spreading our blankets out like a parachute, and put them down. We felt so much better when Kashiwagi-san left from our sight that it almost felt mercenary.

After spreading out the blankets, we went into Sachiko-sama’s bedroom bathroom by seniority (as big as it was, we couldn’t fit all of us at once), and as I was enveloped by Sachiko-sama’s own body soap and shampoo, I couldn’t stop myself from humming. Maybe I was this happy because I was able to see Sachiko-sama’s room. As I expected, it was gorgeous, but I won’t bother explaining. I’m feeling this good, there’s no reason for me to compare it to my own room and depress myself.

And, we were in the middle of deciding who was going to sleep where when Yuuki stumbled into our room. Of course, we immediately thought, “What!?” and Sachiko-sama even quickly wrapped her negligee with a gown.

“Um, so, what. You don’t want to sleep alone with Kashiwagi. So you rolled into the room of the three, young maidens.”

Hmmhmm, abbreviated Rosa Gigantea, who looked like she was cordially listening, but in truth, she was definitely finding this hilarious.

“Yes.”

Yuuki nodded, looking troubled.

“I get it.”

I didn’t understand him at first, but I realized Kashiwagi-san’s orientation and thought, “Oh, wow.”

Neither Sachiko-sama nor Rosa Gigantea asked “why.” Because they knew, of course. That Kashiwagi-san was a homosexual. But they both had, like me, probably forgotten all about it.

(But, but.)

Even if he’s a homosexual for boys, did it necessarily mean he liked anyone? After all, Hanadera Institute is an all-boys school, so it would be like unleashing a wolf among sheep, so that would be extremely dangerous.

“Kashiwagi-san is rather distrusted, isn’t he?”

“How rude, Rosa Gigantea. I am always a gentleman.”

And Kashiwagi-san appeared, having pursued Yuuki. This time, I covered my pajama with a sweater. Rosa Gigantea seemed to intend to sleep in a T-shirt and spats, but she didn’t care about the male eyes. –Though I think she should have fretted about it just a bit.

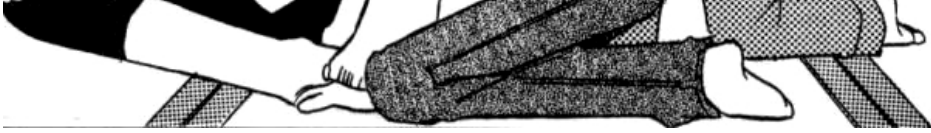
“I was joking, Yukichi. Here, come.”

He lifted both hands and gave a somewhat crooked smile, like that of Rhett Butler. Even if you weren’t Yuuki, you’d want to run from that. I felt goosebumps all over.

“Even if you were just teasing, don’t you think the fact that he believed you reflects on your habitual behavior, Kashiwagi?”

Said Rosa Gigantea. Wait, can you be talking?





“Not that you can be talking.” See.

And everyone could see Kashiwagi-sama’s counterattack coming.

“I mean, who do you think you are, anyways? A woman talking to a man like that. Is that what the ladies’ school, Lillian, is coming to these days? How uncute.”

“Hmph. None of your business. And if the student council president has such an old-fashioned view on women, Hanadera isn’t much of anything, either. Buddha must be rolling in his grave.”

“What-!”

Maybe it was because they hated each other, because they were really going to the extremes. Plus, they were both good with words, and they had the confidence of student council presidents. And to top it off, now they were fighting for their school pride. And Yuuki, who sort of caused this, was looking confused about what to do.

“Sure, Yuuki-san. Go ahead and bring blankets. Not with us, but you may use the empty room on the other side of these sliding doors.”

Leaving that seemingly endless verbal spar to the side, Sachiko-sama turned to Yuuki.

“Th, thank you very much. Sachiko-san.”

(Sa, Sachiko-san!?)

Even though he was my blood-related brother, I became enraged. Calling my precious onee-sama by “-san!?”

“Yumi. Lead him, please.”

“... Yes.”

I reluctantly stood up. Onee-sama's orders are absolute, anyways. And Sachiko-sama didn't seem perturbed by being called "-san," so there was no point in me kicking up a fuss about it.

"Oh, I'll go too."

Kashiwagi-san paused the fight and said.

"Wait."

Rosa Gigantea hurriedly stopped him.

"Why're you going?"

"If Yukichi is going to sleep here, I have to bring my own set of blankets, too."

Never questioning his own properness, Kashiwagi-san continued, with an "I mean, think about it" expression on his face.

"Even if you're next door, it's still just a single sliding door. And Yukichi's a healthy guy. Yumi-chan aside, if he were to attack Sacchan or you, what would you do? So I need to keep watch over him."

You're more dangerous, I thought, but then I remembered Kashiwagi-san isn't interested in girls. Well, thinking objectively, without thinking of Yuuki as a relative, a high school male was indeed dangerous, but. Ummm. But I'd rather not think about that. I mean, he is my brother.

Then.

"Sachiko-san, are you still awake?"

The door to the hallway slid open, and aunt Sayako peeked in.

"Oh, Suguru-san was here, too?"

"Oh listen to them, they're trying to leave me out, alone."

Without any humor or jest, Kashiwagi-san bluntly spoke the truth. Well, we were trying to eliminate Kashiwagi-san, so I guess he does end up being “left out.”

“My, why?”

“Probably because I’m handsome.”

-If Yoshino-san were here, she’d say his brains definitely melted somewhere.

“No, that’s not-”

When I began speaking, Rosa Gigantea harrumphed and stopped me. Apparently aunt Sayako doesn’t know of Kashiwagi-san’s “preference.” Well, when you see aunt Sayako’s serene smile, you end up feeling like you shouldn’t tell her.

“Oh, come come, play nice, okay?”

“... Yes.”

And so, despite everyone else objecting, Kashiwagi-san was to sleep next door with Yuuki.

“-Oh well, then. Okay, Yuuki, if Kashiwagi attacks you, shout for help.”

Said Rosa Gigantea to Yuuki, who was walking to bring blankets.

“Oh, mother, did you want something?”

She said “good night” an hour ago, but she suddenly came back, so of course she probably had a reason. And she was wearing a gown over her pajama, so aunt Sayako seemed to already be prepared to go to sleep.

“Oh, yes, yes. Sachiko-san. Isn’t tonight the night to float treasure boats?”

“Oh, that’s right. The second of every year. I had completely forgotten, I’ll get them ready now.”

And with that, Sachiko-sama left the Japanese-style room. And she returned with “writing utensils” such as brush pens, magic pens and ball pens, as well as neatly colored paper, so I could surprise those were the tools needed to “float treasure boats.”

“What’s starting?”

Rosa Gigantea didn’t know either. She asked aunt Sayako, who’d pulled a cabinet table from the corner of the room to the light and begun writing on the back of the colored paper.

“‘Nakakiyo,’ you don’t do it at Sei-san’s house?”

“Nakakiyo?”

Of course, we didn’t do such a thing at the Fukuzawa household either. I don’t even know what it is.

“Oh, nakakiyo? Wow, how nostalgic. I didn’t know you still did that.”

Kashiwagi-san said, as he put his blankets down.

“What’s ‘nakakiyo’?”

Yuuki asked.

“You guys don’t do it, either?”

-No, we don’t. So, what’s this “nakakiyo?” Does it have to do with treasure boats?

“It’s a charm. They say if you write a song starting with nakakiyono on a sailboat and put it under your pillow, you see a good first-dream.”

As Sachiko-sama explained, aunt Sayako seemed to have finished writing, as she placed her brush pen down. The words she showed me had beautiful, flowing handwriting.

Nakakiyono

Toononefurino minamesame

Naminorifuneno

Otonoyokikana

“Hmmhmm, a palindrome.”

Rosa Gigantea nodded.

“A palindrome?”

I tilted my head, and then Yuuki blushed and muttered, “You don’t even know that?”

“Read it backwards.”

“Nakakiyono- oh.”

Wow. It was like “tomato” and “shinbunshi (newspaper).” Oh, there was a Koike Keiko-san in my class, too. I mean, I’d end up “Miyuwazakufu,” so that’s no fun.

“But, what does it mean?” It sounded more like an incantation than a charm, to me, so it didn’t soak into my heart at all. I mean, what’s “nakakiyo,” anyways?

“‘Nakakiyo’ is for ‘nagaki yono (of the long night).’ Changing the voiced sounds into non-voiced sounds, like the iroha song, you know?”

“Iroha song?”

“You know. ‘Irohanihoheto’ is for ‘Iro ha nioedo (the fragrance of colors).’”

“Ah.”

I found that out for the first time. But I didn’t want to embarrass my onee-sama any more, so I stayed silent.

Nagaki yono (of the long night)

Touno neburi no mina mezame (everyone awakens from
a distant sleep)

Naminori fune no (the surfing boat's)

Otono yokikana (pleasant sounds)

Sachiko-sama wrote a song mixing kanji and kana. And then the unintelligible incantation magically turned into a 31-syllable poem.

“Nagaki yono-”

I didn’t understand exactly what it was supposed to mean, but I felt like I could see a wonderful dream while being softly rocked on a big boat. After all, that’s what “otonno yokikana” would mean.

“Is this an Ogasawara custom?”

“No, my parent’s home. That’s why I was so surprised the first New Year’s after being wed, because no one folded treasure boats.”

Aunt Sayako giggled like a young girl as she folded her sailboat. Yes, I don’t think it’s very prevalent in the world. At the very least, it’s the first time I’d heard of it. Rosa Gigantea, too.

But, oh, as expected of someone from a noble family. When it comes to elegance, I think this is the zenith of it. Even if aunt Sayako wasn’t the wife of the “rich Ogasawara household,” she would probably be living elegantly like this, anyways. There might be other unimaginable customs floating around this household.

And, now Sachiko-sama folds treasure boats with her. Sachiko-sama’s father and uncles were absent, but if guests or assistants remained in the house on the night of the second, they were mystified and did it with her. Kashiwagi-san, too. Because he was a cousin, he probably stayed over since he was young. It was a bit vexing, but as I said to Rosa Gigantea, it happened “before I became her sister,” and I repeated that to myself like a mantra. The past is the past.

Of course, we folded treasure boats, too. If we could partake in such an unusual experience, and have a good dream on top of it all, there was no way I was going to miss out.

“Nakakiyono toononefurino minamesame...”

We copied the example Sachiko-sama gave us. The brush pen handwriting was artistic, and in comparison, our felt-tip pen handwriting looked much thinner and edgy, and because we were so used to writing horizontally, the letters end up gradually slanting. Plus, we spaced it horribly, so there was plenty of margin to the left and under it, so it looked pretty bad.

“Who cares. Once you fold it, you can’t see it anymore.”

Displaying mind reading skills, Rosa Gigantea consoled me. Of course, I was probably going through life’s many phases, anyways.

We sat shoulder-to-shoulder and shared the small desk. I stole a glance at the completed and in-progress ones, and noticed Kashiwagi-san and Rosa Gigantea both had clean, skillful handwriting. It was like, not tall, or wide, or slanted, but rather was handwriting that would cleanly fit Japanese writing paper, that sort of model-like handwriting. And yet they still had a unique blend to their styles. So they looked completely different. That said, they were both strongly unique individuals, so that wasn't surprising.

Yuuki's handwriting was big and bold. It wasn't good, per se, but it had its own flavor. I was used to seeing it, but in this situation, it looked fresh.

After writing the song, I double-checked by reading backwards, and then folded the boat so the words were inside. First, you fold it into a regular boat, and then you add a sail. It'd been a while since I did origami so I was a bit confused at first, but after a bit of fidgeting with the windmill, I figured it out.

"Not like that, Yuuki-san, see, you fold this diagonally."

Sachiko-sama finished folding her treasure boat earlier, so she was teaching Yuuki how to fold it.

"How envious."

Whispered Kashiwagi-san, but the significance of that was unfathomable.

"Good night."

This time, really. Aunt Sayako returned to her bedroom after folding her treasure boat. Before the sliding doors were shut down, Yuuki dragged his sheets right next to the door, and dragged Kashiwagi-san's sheets to the complete other side.

"Sachiko, over there, Yumi-chan in the middle, and I'll be here."

Rosa Gigantea said they should pick who sleeps where with rock-scissors-papers in the beginning, but now she seemed to have a complete change of heart as she felt sleepy, directing people to where they would sleep. Rosa

Gigantea closest to the room with the Hanadera guys, me, then Sachiko-sama.

“Children in the middle, you know. Yumi-chan is the youngest and has the smallest breasts, so you’re the child.”

“... Then Sachiko-sama’s the mother and Rosa Gigantea’s the father?”

I said what came to mind, and she wrapped an arm around my neck, “What a rude child.”

“You shouldn’t have any complaints, Yumi-chan, you’re next to Sachiko.”

“Right.”

I felt happy and I felt a bit defeated. It was a chance to see Sachiko-sama’s face, but in turn, she’d be able to see my foolish face.

“No need to worry yourself, Rosa Gigantea.”

Sachiko-sama smiled.

“Nonsense.”

Rosa Gigantea looked determined. “You can’t be too cautious.”

She dubiously glanced at the door.

(... Oh, I get it!)

Rosa Gigantea didn’t trust Kashiwagi-san. Should I be happy or sad that she wasn’t thinking of Yuuki at all? She probably set up sleeping positions in case Kashiwagi-san had any weird thoughts.

Like, if he were to attack Yuuki, she’d be able to rush over immediately.

Like, if he were to try to go near Sachiko-sama. The two people in the middle would be obstacles, so we could thwart him. Even if he said he was only interested in men, he did have the precedence of trying to kiss

Sachiko-sama, so you could let your guard down. But of course, that just made me an obstacle.

“What should we do about lighting?”

“How about a brown-out?”

I piped up.

“Brown-out?”

They both asked. Huh, they don’t know what a brown-out is?

Then a poorly stifled chuckle from the other side of the door came through.
—Kashiwagi-san.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to listen in. Yumi-chan, do you mean one light bulb?”

“Yes.”

“What a wonderful expression. That does indeed turn the room brown.”

But Kashiwagi-san’s praise didn’t make me happy. Oh, but his chuckle was contagious, as Sachiko-sama began giggling, too. Rosa Gigantea killed her voice by lying face down in her pillow.

“That’s Yukichi’s big sister for you. What a flavor.”

I could just imagine Kashiwagi-san holding his stomach with laughter and Yuuki cradling his head in embarrassment. I’m sorry I’m an idiot, brother.

The other room seemed to pick “black” instead of “brown.” I could see their lights being turned out.

And that left our room.

“I think it’s easier to sleep in the dark?”

“As Sachiko says. Two-to-one, Yumi-chan’s opinion is rejected. Lights out.”

Quick vote, quick action, the lights were immediately snuffed out.

“Oh, evil.”

“Yumi. Are you afraid of the dark?”

Sachiko-sama whispered.

“N, no.”

“Ah, bingo.”

Rosa Gigantea maliciously laughed.

“That’s not it!”

Well, actually it was, but it’s not something you admit. But of course, denying it was just like affirming it, anyways.

“Ooh, complainers get rolled into a reed.”

Rolled in a reed? -As I pondered that, I think it was Rosa Gigantea, who tossed a blanket over me and tightened it from both sides. Umm, isn’t this more like a Belgium waffle than a reed?

“If you’re scared, ‘fess up!”

“Waah.”

Squeeze, squeeze.

“Onee-sama, save me.”

Rosa Gigantea was going all-out in hugging me. It was through a blanket, but because Sachiko-sama was right there, she was enjoying herself to the fullest.

“Save, is something happening?”

“Rosa Gigantea-”

As soon as I started speaking, the lights went on. Under the bright lights, Rosa Gigantea backed off and surrendered to Sachiko-sama.

“I take back my words. I support brown. If something happens in the dark, our reaction is slowed.”

“It seems so.”

Still holding onto the string for the light, Sachiko-sama laughed bitterly. When I got up and looked at what they saw, the sliding door was open, and Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki both looked like they were going to jump in. It was hard to see if the door was open in the dark. Not that it was pitch black, because light came through the hallway lights.

“Just so you know, we didn’t open the door for bad intentions.”

“We know, we know. It’s too early for a sneaking visit.”

“Alright, then.”

They were having such a childish fight earlier, so it was kind of surprising that they could have a mature conversation. –I thought. Understanding without much explanation, then receiving the sign of understanding, and through it all, even including a bit of jest.

Maybe Kashiwagi-san fit Rosa Gigantea’s level of conversation perfectly. I mean, sometimes I feel like I’m stuck in a maze, but Kashiwagi-san deftly handled it like a game of catch. Though maybe it should have been obvious from the moment it was apparent they could have a verbal spat. But if I were to say that, Rosa Gigantea would squeeze me to death again.

But, “sneaking visit?” What era is she from?

“Yuuki, I won’t make fun of your sister anymore, so go ahead and sleep.” Yuuki didn’t know what was going on, but when he heard his name, he

snapped back and hurriedly closed the door he opened.

“G, good night.”

“Yes, good night. Yuuki’s cute.”

Rosa Gigantea seemed to think fondly of my brother. Maybe she likes raccoon faces.

“Then this uncute fellow will retreat, too.”

“Thank you for your troubles, Mr. Bodyguard.”

“No problem.”

Kashiwagi-san closed the other door, and Sachiko-sama mumbled.

“Suguru-san, thank you for your concern.”

“Good night.”

Kashiwagi-san shut the doors together softly. And then on the other side of the door, they began wordlessly pillow fighting, so it was kind of exasperating. But after the conversation about attacking and not attacking, it was kind of smile-inducing.

“Well those treasure boats are going to end up lost.”

Turning the room brown after leaving one lightbulb, Sachiko-sama slowly slid herself into the sheets to my side. And that slight breeze sent the fragrance of her shampoo to me. My hair, or Sachiko-sama’s hair, or maybe Rosa Gigantea’s hair, I don’t know. Not that it mattered, I felt peaceful anyways.

“By the way, Yumi-chan, we’re getting up at six thirty tomorrow morning.”

Out of the blue, Rosa Gigantea placed an already-set alarm clock next to my pillow.

“Ehh.”

There’s no school, so I whined for more sleep, but she would have none of it.

“We’re eating breakfast together. Because it’s ‘lodging.’”

She explained aunt Sayako’s cooking was delicious but took extraordinary time to finish. So the plan was to occupy the kitchen before she began making breakfast.

“If she wants to eat bread, she’s the type of person to start measuring out how much flour would be needed.”

Sachiko-sama sighed. Well, she was so confused about pouring tea that it was understandable. Of course, employed cooks usually prepared meals.

“... If we also did radio exercise, this would be a complete lodging.”

I let slip, and Rosa Gigantea began cackling.

“Sounds nice, let’s do it.”

“Feel free. But, I won’t be accompanying.”

-Indeed. Sachiko-sama and radio exercises were a mismatch.

Rosa Gigantea said she’d drive Yuuki and I home after breakfast, but I politely turned her down. Apparently it took a while to walk to the nearest station, though, but I would also prefer not to ride with Kashiwagi-san. Since he’s the same age as Rosa Gigantea, he’s likely recently gotten his license, too. I don’t trust his handling technique, plus there’s that red car. I became embarrassed just looking at it.

What to do.

While I pondered, the blanket warmed my body, and I slowly drifted. The pillow fight next door had ended at some point, so it was silent. They were so active right before sleeping, so they must have gone straight to sleep.

I thought I'd never actually like Kashiwagi-san, but he wasn't as bad as I thought. After all, he's related by blood to Sachiko-sama, and she did like him a long time ago (this is important!). So he's not really that bad.

I turned around and went closer to Sachiko-sama. So we wouldn't get cold, we had stuck our blankets next to each other.

(Did onee-sama already go to sleep?)

I could feel Rosa Gigantea, behind me, was already in sleeping mode. Hey, hey, weren't you going to protect us?

I decided to leave it at "I never heard" her soft snores. Not for Rosa Gigantea, but for Rosa Gigantea's fans.

(Still, it's like a dream.)

In the brown room, I could see Sachiko-sama's sleeping face at an arm's length. I was the only one that could savor this scene, this moment.

Not even her cousin, her fiancé, Kashiwagi-san.

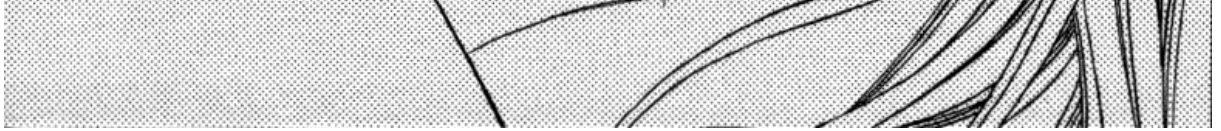
I truly appreciated being born a girl who could become Sachiko-sama's sister, and that I was a Lillian student at the same time as Sachiko-sama. I thanked Maria-sama with all my heart.

I usually sleep facing up, but I decided to sleep with my right shoulder down.

-And that's when Sachiko-sama's eyes opened.

(Eh!?)





I panicked, like a middle-aged man who just got caught peeping, but Sachiko-sama didn't seem to be scolding me.

"Yumi."

Sachiko-sama spoke to me in a voice only I could hear.

"Y, yes."

"I'm glad you could come today."

"Yes."

"If you don't mind, feel free to come again."

"Yes."

As pathetic as it may seem, I could only say "yes," not being able to answer fully. I don't know if Sachiko-sama was exasperated or not, but she giggled, said "good night," and closed her eyes again.

She went through the trouble of talking to me-. I felt guilty, but I also became elated, replaying Sachiko-sama's words in my mind.

(Did she say she was glad? And, I could come again?)

I was so excited the drowsiness that was visiting me just a moment ago vanished.

I even folded treasure boats, too. If I didn't get to sleep soon, morning would arrive.

But my simplistic mind simply repeated Sachiko-sama's words like a circular canon.

I'm glad

Come again

I'm glad

Come again

Eventually those words became waves, and I was on a big boat riding those waves.

My first dream was of Sachiko-sama cosplaying as Benten carrying a towering stack of sushi boxes.

When I thought I should help, Rosa Gigantea, looking like Daikokuten, arrived with bags of takoyaki and toumorokoshi slung over her left shoulder, and she chased me everywhere while cackling with a small mallet.

And when the mallet hit me, lots of small candy sprayed everywhere. Like rain, and that rain never ended.

Nagakiyono touno nemurino minamezame naminori funeno otono yokikana

Postscript

I know this is sudden, but do you do “nakakiyo” at your house?

Hello, this is Konno.

What’s “nakakiyo?” -You probably flipped to the postscript before finishing the novel.

No, no problem. I’m not criticizing you or anything. A lot of people read the postscript first, so authors tend to write with that in mind, anyways.

If “nakakiyo” doesn’t ring a bell, how about “treasure boat?” Do you put a sailboat under your pillow before seeing your first dream? Or is it still a “what’s that?”

As for why I asked, my household did it every year, but no one I know does it, so I realized it was an extremely minor thing. So I wondered what would happen if I took a survey.

But this is just my own curiosity, so there’s nothing to gain by answering. If you’re kind enough to reply anyways, I would be very happy if you added a side note of “we do it!” or “we don’t! in your letters. (<- you’re just going to be happy!?)

However, customs are interesting, aren’t they.

We live in Tokyo, but we follow customs and charms and that sort of things through our daily lives (not really any religion, just aboriginal, I guess), and depending on where you live, you have a whole set of unique customs, too, so I thought, “wow” while reading letters from friends and relatives.

But it must be tough for those of you with commandments like “don’t talk to anyone while eating futomaki.” If I could become invisible, I’d certainly

like to observe a family following that. It'd be pretty cool if everyone was sitting side by side like moai statues. Oh, but I guess in that sort of instance, no one would pick up the phone, either?

Of course, this custom gets less strict in some places, too. "While eating futomaki, there's nothing about limits of what direction you sit or that you can't talk," I heard, from other people. Speaking of which, is it a custom to eat futomaki on Setsubun? At our household, all we do is throw beans at each other, and then eat a number of beans corresponding to the year. But I think it's more widespread than "nakakiyo."

By the way, "nakakiyo" isn't really a Konno custom so much as something my mother brought to Tokyo as a tool for getting married. And my mother wasn't really any nobility like aunt Sayako, she's just a regular commoner. I don't even know if an ancestor ever took in a prestigious (in my opinion), elegant custom, ever.

Speaking of which, there are a lot of ideas about first dreams, the night of New Year's Day, the night of the second of January, the night of Setsubun, and other such things, aren't there? I used my knowledge of the second day in the novel. So there are probably many that thought, "Huh?" while reading the story. When do you see "first dreams" in your household?

Also, it's another two-story volume, what did you think?

The first story was the usual series, the second was like a side story. Time flipped back, so "Nagakiyono" takes place a bit before "Rosa Canina."

Oh, so it ends up being a bit like "Forest of Thorns." But this time it's not a tale of tragic love. Some of you may be relieved. But don't be, because the men show up. So those of you who hate Mr. K, I don't strongly recommend "Nagakiyono" to you (... What's an author doing saying that?). Alright, I warned you. So don't complain "men showed up" after reading it. Although I guess this doesn't work for people who read the postscript after reading the novel (laugh).

Do you know of the flower Rosa Canina?

It's not an imaginary flower, it's an existing rose flower. Rosa Canina seeds are often used for Rose Hip Tea. I just found out.

Oh, yes, how do you read "Shirobara-sama?"

A lot of people have asked me this, so I'll answer it here.

You read it as "Rosa Gigantea." Without the -sama. The furigana has -sama, right? But Yumi and other underclassmen call her Rosa Gigantea. This isn't because they're being impolite, but because there's respect built into the title Rosa Gigantea, anyways. That's why I emphasize the "Rosa Gigantea." Likewise for "Rosa Chinensis" and "Rosa Foetida." The "tsubomi" are bouton. That should clear things up (sorry this is for Japanese, they're actually written white-rose-sama, yellow-rose-sama, etc.).

I'm finally almost out of postscript pages.

There're a number of things I think I should explain, but that'll come eventually. Maybe not in postscripts, but inside the novels.

-And.

You'll probably see me next in the year 2000.

Well, gokigenyou everyone. Until then.

Konno Oyuki

